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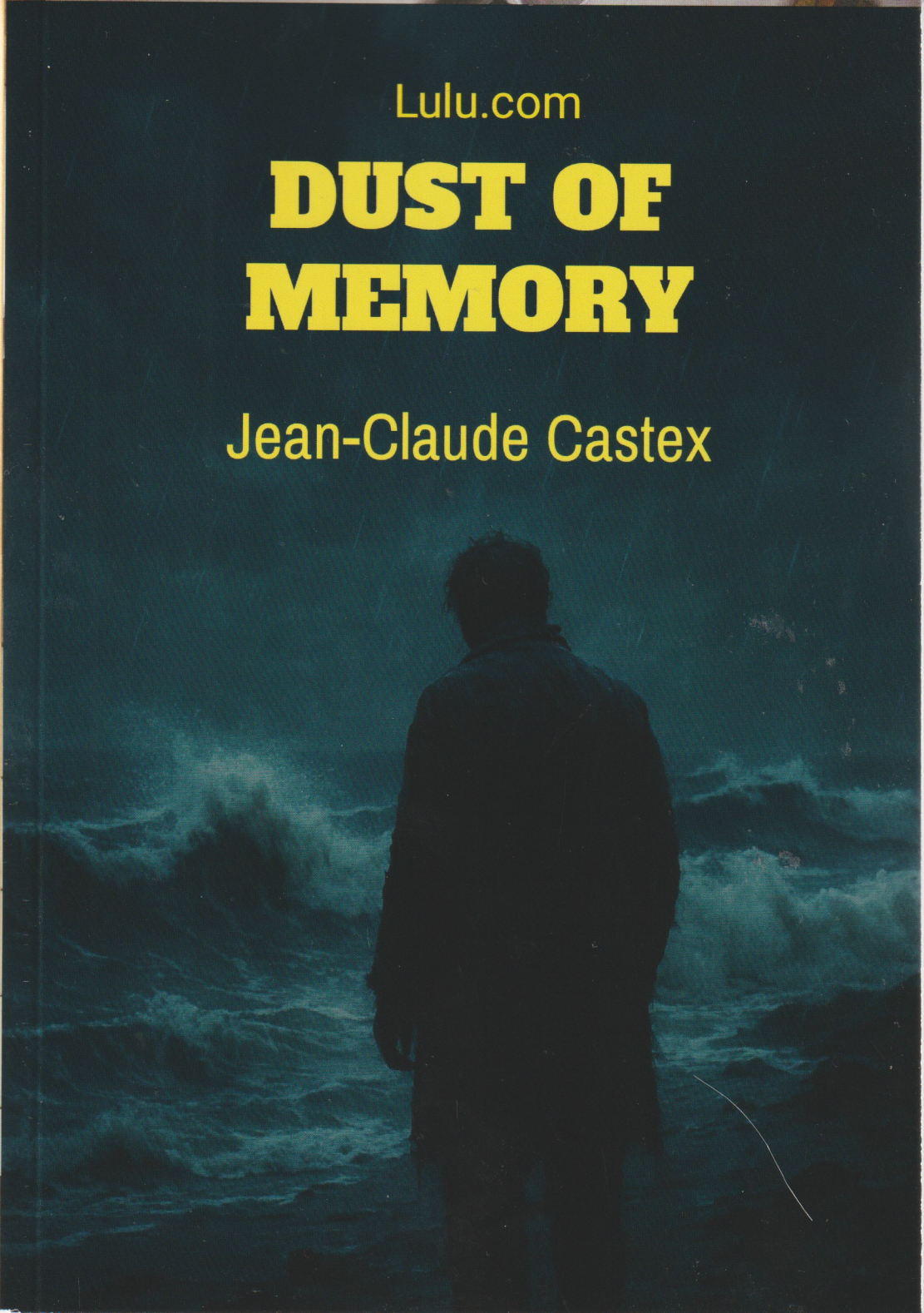
Jean-Claude Castex



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The author presents an overview of stories from yesterday and today:

• the murderous madness of a clergyman whose mind descended into deep insanity on the shores of the Yukon;
• the tragedy of a Vancouver woman who ended her life “out of hatred for the man she loved too much”;
• the slow death of the workers trapped on the Quebec Bridge, caught like rats in a tangle of twisted beams, watching helplessly as the merciless tide rose towards them;
• the destructive storms of the North Atlantic, including the one that led to the disappearance of the Ocean Ranger oil rig.

The Strange Life
and the mysterious death of Cindy James

This was a case steeped in mystery, blending the psychological torment of Hitchcock, the bloody violence of Brian De Palma, and the eerie, supernatural dread one might expect from Stephen King.

On the evening of May 25, 1989, shortly after 10 p.m., Agnes and her husband, Tom Woodstock, parked their car in front of a modest but well-kept house on Claysmith Rose Street, in Vancouver — Canada's Pacific metropolis. They had been invited by Cindy James to a bridge party.

Cindy James [Priv. Coll.]

Almost immediately, the Woodstocks noticed something odd : Cindy's blue 1981 Chevrolet Citation wasn't in the driveway. That was unusual. Agnes gave a soft honk of the horn as they stopped in front of the garage — Cindy's habitual cue to appear at the window, wave with a warm smile, and welcome her guests inside. But this time, no one came.

Agnes knocked on the front door. No response. Tom circled around and knocked on the back door. Still nothing. They knocked again, peered through the windows. Silence. Emptiness. Something felt wrong.

The couple's concern deepened instantly. They knew that Cindy James had been the victim of a prolonged campaign of psychological and physical harassment for the past seven years.

Before leaving, they decided to check the basement to see if the Johnsons, Cindy's downstairs neighbors, had seen or heard anything.

—*Do you think she might have had car trouble ?* Agnes asked Mr. Johnson, her brow furrowed.

Cindy, meticulous as ever, usually took her car in for a full inspection anytime she had a few days off. But according to the Johnsons, the car had been running fine. They remembered seeing her leave around 4 or 4:30 p.m., after she mentioned she would be depositing her paycheck and running a few errands.

Agnes and Tom returned to their car, where they sat motionless and silent for a few long moments, anxiety tightening its grip on them. Cindy was never late. No matter the circumstances, she always made sure to return before nightfall. Agnes checked her watch — it was past 8 p.m., and night had already fallen beneath a thick overcast sky.

In growing desperation, the Woodstocks decided to alert the police and head home. On the way, Agnes suggested a detour to the *Blundell Shopping Centre*, where Cindy often did her banking.

—*Look!* she cried suddenly, slamming on the brakes. *Her car! It's right there!*

She aimed the headlights directly at Cindy's blue Chevrolet Citation, parked in the lot outside the Bank of Montreal branch.

They leaned forward, scanning the interior of the vehicle. Several grocery bags sat on the passenger seat. At first glance, everything seemed perfectly ordinary. But Agnes frowned.

—*That's odd*, she murmured. *Every time I came here with her, she insisted on parking right in front of the bank. She'd sometimes wait ten minutes for a space to open up.*

A pause. Then, with urgency rising in her voice:

—*Something's not right. Let's call the police again.*

It was nearly 11 p.m. by the time they arrived at the Richmond police station. At the front desk, Agnes explained that they wanted to report a missing person.

—*How long has she been missing ?* the receptionist asked in a monotone.

—*At least two hours… probably more*, Agnes replied.

—*I'm sorry,* the woman said flatly. *We don't issue missing person alerts until twenty-four hours have passed."*

Frustrated by the receptionist's indifference and strict adherence to protocol, Tom and Agnes stepped outside, exchanging worried glances under the dim streetlight. Then they turned and went back in.

This time, Agnes mentioned that Cindy James had an active police file and that Constable Gerry Anderson had specifically asked to be notified if anything unusual happened.

—*I'm sorry,* the receptionist cut in again, without emotion. *Constable Anderson is off-duty tonight. He'll be back in the morning*.

Out on the sidewalk once more, Agnes muttered:

—*Something's very wrong. We need to talk to someone else — not that stubborn woman.*

Resolute, they stepped back inside. The receptionist, now visibly irritated, watched them through a convex mirror fixed behind her desk.

—*What do you want now ?* she asked, her tone sharper.

Agnes calmly requested to speak to a police officer. The receptionist informed her that all officers were currently busy.

—*Then we'll wait*, Agnes said, taking a seat on a worn wooden bench. Tom sat beside her.

After twenty anxious minutes, an officer finally appeared. Upon hearing Cindy's name and learning that Constable Anderson had previously flagged her case for priority attention, the officer agreed to look into it and left immediately for the mall.

When his flashlight swept across Cindy's car, the beam caught a faint, glistening drop of blood on the driver's door handle. Alarmed, he radioed for backup.

On the pavement, just under a meter from the vehicle, lay Cindy's bank card and a deposit slip. He took care not to touch anything, preserving the scene for the forensic team.

The presence of blood, the discarded bank items, and the eerie abandonment of the car all pointed to one chilling conclusion : Cindy James had likely been abducted.

Constable Gerry Anderson was not on duty that evening. But when the phone rang shortly after midnight and he was informed that Cindy James had gone missing, he immediately jumped into his car and headed to the scene. As a member of the local RCMP's investigative unit, he continued to work in plain clothes.

Anderson had developed a genuine attachment to Cindy and had made every effort to support her through her prolonged ordeal of harassment. He believed that, at least for a time, he had gained her trust. In a letter addressed to RCMP headquarters dated May 15, Cindy had voiced her frustration over the "arrogant rudeness" of other investigators handling her case, yet she had singled out Constable Anderson for praise, citing "*his patience, consistent professionalism, and exemplary conduct.*"

Unfortunately, the identification team Anderson joined that night recovered only Cindy's own fingerprints. Just before 1 a.m., the Richmond RCMP contacted Agnes Woodstock as she was preparing for bed. They requested she meet Constable Anderson at Cindy's house to provide access using the spare key in her possession. When she arrived and offered the alarm system code, she was surprised to hear that the constable already had it.

—*She told me never to share that code—not even with the police !* Agnes exclaimed.

She was unaware that police investigators sometimes had access to confidential information, even those considered private. Inside Cindy's home, everything appeared undisturbed. The space was tastefully arranged and filled with healthy, well-maintained green plants. A bridge table stood ready, with paper and a sharpened pencil prepared for the evening's game. The only anomaly was that the curtains remained open — a deviation from Cindy's usual habit of closing them before nightfall, out of fear of being watched.

At 2:30 a.m., Cindy's car was towed to the RCMP impound lot, secured in a special holding area so that a full search could resume in daylight.

The day after Cindy's disappearance, Richmond police began a door-to-door canvass within a block and a half radius of the *Blundell Shopping Centre*. Meanwhile, RCMP officers launched a broader search across the entire Richmond metropolitan area, a southern suburb of Vancouver. A helicopter was deployed to take aerial photographs of the area where Cindy's car had been discovered, and the *Canadian Coast Guard* used a hovercraft to survey the shoreline. Dikes surrounding Richmond —a city built on a polder— were thoroughly searched.

At *Vancouver International Airport,* passenger departure lists were scrutinized, but no evidence emerged that Cindy had flown out without informing anyone. Taxi companies were contacted but yielded no leads. City bus drivers whose routes passed through the shopping center were also interviewed, to no avail. Throughout the day, local merchants and employees were

questioned. Many recognized Cindy from the photograph police showed them, but none recalled seeing her on that fateful evening of May 25, 1989. Neighbors were also questioned, but again, no one had witnessed anything out of the ordinary. Cindy James had, it seemed, simply vanished — evaporated like a phantom, as if spirited away by some unseen force.

Cindy James, born Cynthia Elizabeth Hack on June 12, 1944, was forty-five years old when she disappeared. Her father, Otto Hack, was a retired RCAF colonel. Her mother, Matilda, had devoted herself full-time to raising their six children — three boys and three girls. Cindy was the eldest of the daughters, born somewhere in the middle of the family.

In July 1966, Cindy graduated as a registered nurse and soon began a romantic relationship with a man thirty years her senior: Dr. Roy Makepeace, a South African-born psychiatrist at *Vancouver General Hospital*. Roy, seven years older than Cindy's own father, loved sailing, and Cindy seemed to develop a shared enthusiasm for the sport. Defiant of gossip, the couple spent their weekends sailing through the blue-green waters of the *Strait of Juan de Fuca* and *Semiahmoo Bay*. For Roy, Cindy embodied vitality and new beginnings, everything his aging and disengaged wife no longer represented. Within five months, he had divorced his wife and married Cindy.

But the marriage soon lost its sheen. Cindy eventually confessed she had never liked sailing — she, like Roy's first wife, had come to dread it. Roy began to suspect that Cindy had married him for his considerable wealth. Their relationship deteriorated, and they divorced in July 1982. As with his first wife, Cindy received a generous settlement. She had strategically left her job and thus had no independent income at the time of separation. After the

divorce, she returned to nursing full-time, earning a respectable salary.

Despite their split, Cindy continued using the surname *Makepeace* until 1986, when she legally adopted the more poetic name "*Cindy James*." That same year, she relocated from Vancouver to Richmond, reportedly to escape a stalker who had been tormenting her. Although reluctant to give up the surname Makepeace—ironically symbolic of what she most lacked—she did not revert to her birth name, Hack. She took a position as a team coordinator at Blenheim House, a day program for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Although she resumed full-time employment, she refused to work night shifts. In time, she gained the admiration of her colleagues, including psychiatrists, who respected her for her professionalism and deep commitment to her work.

At 5:30 p.m. on May 26, the day after Cindy vanished, Constable Anderson arrived at the RCMP pound. Corporal Henzie was already present, along with a forensic technician photographing the interior of Cindy's car. Before handling any items, the team carefully searched for fingerprints, fibers, and hairs. The heater had been left on, set to "Defrost." The gear was in "Park." Her work pass was visible on the dashboard. The ashtray, still closed, contained six Cameo cigarette butts—her preferred brand. The fuel gauge showed the tank was half full, and the cassette player held a Herb Alpert tape. Between the front seats lay bank slips and unopened envelopes. In the glove compartment, amid maps and miscellaneous items, investigators found a scrap of paper bearing a registration number and the words "KDV 784, small metallic grey."

Also in the glove compartment was Cindy's Sofrex — a silent, manual alarm device she usually kept close. It had been

given to her by private investigator Ozzie Kaban, whom she hired after her first assault. She normally held the device in her hand when walking to her car at night. Yet on the day she disappeared, it was left unused—an ominous sign. The first time she had used it, in October 1988, police found her unconscious in her car. Her legs were hanging out of the open door, her hands tied behind her back, her mouth sealed with tape. A black nylon stocking had been knotted tightly around her neck. She was in a coma—but she survived.

Investigators continued examining the vehicle. Cindy's black handbag was on the front passenger seat between two brown paper Safeway bags. More groceries were on the floor. Her wallet held $2.77. In the back seat were two blue Sears bags and a child's croquet set she had purchased for an eight-year-old named Adrien, the son of a close friend. The receipt showed the purchase was made at 12:33 p.m.

Later, the RCMP compared the grocery contents with items and prices at Safeway. They found inconsistencies. The groceries did not match any known receipt. It appeared to be a carefully staged tableau—strangely theatrical. The rear seat had been folded down to access the trunk, which was empty. Once again, as with all previous attacks, not a single foreign fingerprint was found—only those of Cindy herself.

A bank receipt revealed she had deposited her paycheck at 7:58 p.m. on the evening of her disappearance. Police tracked down other ATM users around that time. Tracey Maclean recalled nearly being sideswiped in the parking lot by a blonde woman parked oddly in the center of the lot, away from other vehicles. She wore a pink top and had shoulder-length hair, but Maclean could not positively identify Cindy from a photo.

Another witness, Barry Le Roy, a Bank of Montreal manager, had used the ATM at 8:01 p.m. He remembered seeing a blonde woman crossing the lot in a diagonal line. She wore pants and what looked like a blue jacket. Though he tentatively recognized Cindy in the photo, he couldn't be certain. Under hypnosis, he recalled one further detail: she had worn high-heeled boots. Yet he couldn't describe the other half-dozen people in nearby cars.

A few days later, Richard Johnson, an insurance agent who had sold Cindy a life insurance policy, contacted police. A man claiming to be Cindy's father had phoned the office, asking about her policy. The secretary had begun to answer before remembering that such information could not be shared over the phone. She advised the caller to come in person. But Otto Hack later denied making the call.

After Cindy's disappearance, Otto Hack acted as the family's spokesperson, telling reporters how his daughter had been subjected to a relentless seven-year campaign of terror. She had been strangled and left for dead, beaten, and stabbed five times.

The dissemination of this information by the media prompted several individuals to come forward with accounts of incidents they had witnessed—events that might have been connected to the case. Each lead was carefully pursued, but none bore fruit.

On May 29, 1989 —four days after Cindy James's mysterious disappearance— Constable Anderson met with her parents in a renewed attempt to uncover further clues. Otto Hack, a former soldier, proposed enlisting five hundred troops from the Chilliwack military base to launch a thorough ground search of the surrounding area: vacant lots, wooded zones, and abandoned

buildings. To Hack's dismay, Anderson's superior, Hugh Campbell, declined the offer, insisting that local police and RCMP dog units were more than sufficient for the task. He feared the army's involvement would unnecessarily complicate the operations. This decision would later draw criticism during the protracted judicial inquiry that followed.

Nevertheless, the initial investigation did succeed in reconstructing the final day of Cindy's life before her disappearance. That day, she had exuded an unusual radiance, as if uplifted by the intuition that something significant was about to happen. Friends observed a happiness in her they hadn't seen in years. Diane, with whom Cindy had dined at a neighborhood restaurant the evening prior, noted her elation. Earlier that day, Cindy had stopped by her hospital office to collect her paycheck. Her friend Tammy Carmen, struck by how well-groomed she looked, complimented her on her impeccable makeup. Cindy, bubbling with energy, spent the afternoon shopping—among other things, searching for a birthday gift for young Adrien. Before leaving, she called Agnes Woodstock, her bridge partner for the evening.

—*What should I buy for an eight-year-old?"* she asked, lightheartedly.

Before hanging up, she reminded Agnes not to forget their bridge game that night with her husband Tom.

Friends and family —especially the Woodstocks— grew increasingly alarmed. Cindy James had endured seven years of physical and psychological torment, the likes of which defied belief. The day after her disappearance, Constable Anderson recommended that two officers pay a visit to her ex-husband, Dr. Roy Makepeace.

At precisely 3:16 a.m., investigators Robert Boal and Kevin Strand rang the bell of the doctor's luxurious Kitsilano apartment, its vast windows overlooking the dark beach. Makepeace, a tall and solid man edging into baldness and weight gain, appeared bleary-eyed, as if stunned by the glare of oncoming headlights. Who could blame him at such an hour? His voice carried the inflections of a South African accent—an echo of Dutch and Bantu speech patterns.

—*Do you see that mark ?* he asked, pointing to a black gash on the living room wall. *That came from a rifle shot*.

Without waiting for a reply, he walked to the bathroom and retrieved a .303-caliber rifle.

—*I hope you don't think I grabbed this because I saw you coming,* he said quickly. *I'll carry it stock-first. Safety's on, see?*

Makepeace explained that he kept the weapon for protection, having recently experienced troubling incidents that left him shaken and uncertain whom to trust. Asked about his whereabouts the day before, he recounted a cycling trip with a friend to Richmond for the opening of Bridgepoint Market. Later, they returned to Vancouver and drove to dinner, after which he installed a stereo at his friend's home in Deep Cove. He left around 11:30 p.m. and arrived home shortly after midnight. The friend later confirmed this timeline.

—*So, you were in Richmond last night ?* one officer asked while the other quietly assessed the layout of the apartment.

From the bathroom, his colleague observed that the bed had been slept in by only one person. Sensing the tension, Makepeace asked why the police were visiting him at this hour. The officers

then informed him that his ex-wife had vanished and that traces of blood had been discovered in her abandoned car.

Makepeace sighed deeply.

—*Good God… she must be dead,* he muttered, shaking his head and wiping tears from his eyes with thumb and forefinger.

He then mentioned a peculiar voicemail he had received months earlier — two threatening messages left on October 11 and 12. The first, whispered in a chilling breath, said, *"Cindy, you're going to die soon."* The second, in the same rasping tone, added: *"More smacks and downers, and a thousand dollars more when we're rid of her. No more pity."*

He had sent the recordings to his lawyer but not to the Vancouver police, whom he deeply mistrusted. At first, he misheard the first message as saying "*Sunday*" instead of "*Cindy*," and believed the threat was meant for him. He also recalled seeing two suspicious men loitering near his building around that same time.

—*They looked startled when they realized I was watching them from my car*, he noted.

He suspected the pair might have been the same individuals who had attacked Cindy years earlier. Eventually, after several replays, a friend pointed out that the voice likely said "Cindy," not "Sunday." Makepeace searched in vain for the tape among the disarray of his belongings.

In their report, Constables Boal and Strand noted that Dr. Makepeace's behavior did not strike them as unusual or suspicious.

Meanwhile, the RCMP's investigation remained at an impasse.

Then, on June 8, 198 9—more than two weeks after Cindy's disappearance— a construction worker discovered a woman's body in a vacant lot in Richmond. Half-concealed in the tall grass near a dilapidated shack, the corpse lay bound and decomposing. He immediately alerted the RCMP. For investigators, the news brought a grim kind of relief. A corpse, even ravaged by time and nature, can tell more than a reluctant witness. In death, even maggots bear more credible testimony than the living.

Cindy's wrists and ankles had been tied behind her back with black nylon stockings. A cloud of buzzing flies hovered thick around her in the heat, like a swarm conjured from nightmare. On a fuel tank beside the shack, the killer had spray-painted a grotesque message in orange : *"A bitch died right here."*

To ensure the message would not be misunderstood, an orange line had been drawn from the words on the wall to circle the body itself.

Ozzie Kaban, the private investigator working for Cindy and her family, was in Oklahoma City when his son called to inform him of the discovery. Although Cindy's death was initially treated as a homicide, RCMP investigators soon hesitated : was this the work of a sadistic killer — or a meticulously staged suicide ?

At first glance, the answer seemed evident : murder. Cindy had long complained of being stalked, harassed, and assaulted. She had endured obscene phone calls, the mutilation of pets, and at least five violent attacks by a mysterious assailant. Her life had

become a prolonged ordeal of terror. Now, at last, that terror had culminated in her death.

A terrible sight awaited investigators on the edge of a pretty green wood, behind a derelict barn once frequented by transient lovers. A police officer immediately noted a needle mark on Cindy's right arm. Inside the crumbling building, the word *"demon"* had been spray-painted across the decaying plaster wall — an eerie message scrawled in the midst of rot and silence.

On June 10, the day before the autopsy, private investigator Ozzie Kaban rushed home on the first available flight and went directly to the morgue. As he carefully examined Cindy James' lifeless body, he observed bruises along her right side and what he believed to be post-mortem lividity — a purplish discoloration caused by blood settling after death. If he was right, and if the police had indeed found Cindy lying on her *right* side, this suggested she had died elsewhere and been moved.

Kaban theorized the body had been kept for some time in a cool, sheltered place before being deposited at the scene. He also found the drying of Cindy's skin illogical, given that the location where she was discovered was damp and shaded.

More troubling still, he questioned how a corpse could lie for two full weeks in a grassy clearing just twenty meters from the woods without being detected — without so much as a hint of odor or a trace of disturbance by rats or birds of prey. Something did not add up.

Kaban, always imaginative and prone to darker interpretations, perceived in the scene all the signs of a ritualistic act —

possibly satanic, perhaps voodoo. He confided his suspicions to Peter Leask, the Hack family's lawyer.

June 12 would have marked Cindy James' forty-fifth birthday — a day meant to be filled with gifts, balloons, laughter, cake, and candles. Instead, her loved ones gathered solemnly at the *Richmond Funeral Home* to prepare for her burial on June 14. On that day, police discreetly installed hidden video cameras throughout the premises and outside, hoping to capture the faces and license plates of anyone who might approach the grave.

Notably absent was Roy Makepeace, Cindy's ex-husband.

In his eulogy before more than two hundred mourners, Pastor Ralph Mayan said solemnly :

—*No one can begin to fathom the torment Cindy endured in the years leading up to her death. Her passing is a stark reminder of the hatred and violence that plague our society.*

Close friends like Wally Christensen mourned her senseless loss.

—*Her life was blown away*, he said, *and the most terrifying part is that her killer still walks among us*.

He remembered Cindy as a generous, spirited woman, known for her radiant smile and infectious laugh.

—*She gave everything for children with special needs, often under challenging conditions. Her return to nursing after seventeen years of absence was a testament to her strength of character.*

—*To us,* her father added with sorrow, *she was the very embodiment of love and beauty.*

Although the authorities had publicly stated they were investigating her death as a homicide, several officers quietly expressed their belief that Cindy was the architect of her own tragedy. When this theory reached the press, it provoked widespread indignation. Friends and family were outraged, recalling how Cindy had confided that investigator refused to believe her cries for help.

—*My daughter was murdered*, her father insisted, voice trembling with grief and resolve.

The insinuation of suicide — or worse, a staged campaign of self-harm — infuriated many, including two journalists from *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*.

—*This photo of nurse Cindy James devastated me,* wrote Nicole Parton on July 15. *That downturned mouth, those dark bruises beneath her eye — was she beaten ? Or did she beat herself ? I stare into her face and see a woman whose spirit died long before her body followed. What happened to her ?*

The following day, Patricia Graham added in *The Province*:

—*I spent hours reflecting on Cindy James. Even now, I'm disgusted, furious, sorrowful, and ashamed that she was failed so thoroughly. Did she die because she was too difficult to protect ? Too difficult to believe ?*

The inquiry that had begun during Cindy's lifetime now resumed at full speed, transitioning into a formal coroner's inquest. The forensic pathologist overseeing the case was tasked with the

unenviable burden of determining whether legal proceedings should be brought against a possible suspect — most notably Dr. Roy Makepeace, her former husband.

Originally expected to last three weeks, the investigation stretched out for nearly twice that, concluding only in May. From the outset, officers were left deeply perplexed. The question was simple, but the answer eluded them : *Had Cindy James orchestrated her own torment —and even her own death— in a twisted attempt to implicate her former husband ?* Many within the police believed so. Her family, friends, and private investigators fervently disagreed.

And as is often the case, the psychiatrists and lawyers— those "*private*" professionals— were quick to adopt whatever stance served their client's interests best… in other words, those who paid them handsomely

The jurors selected for the inquest reflected a cross-section of ordinary society : a bus driver, a retired heating technician, a company owner, a homemaker, a shopkeeper, and a building manager. These citizens now bore the impossible burden of untangling the truth from a maze of speculation in the haunting death of Cindy James.

Over three weeks, the courtroom echoed with testimony after testimony, each party attempting to steer the jury in their favor. Some witnesses portrayed Cindy as a true victim — a woman hunted by a sadistic stalker. Others painted her as a master manipulator, inflicting psychological and physical wounds upon herself in a calculated bid to ruin the man she *loved-hated* most.

Her parents maintained unwaveringly that their daughter was prey, not predator. They accused the police of failing her, and worse, of hiding behind a suicide theory to escape accountability.

The autopsy revealed a chilling fact: Cindy James had died from a *massive overdose of morphine*. Toxicological analysis found the drug in all her organs — ten times the lethal dose. But how had she managed to inject herself with such a quantity, dispose of the syringe and vial, and bind her own hands and feet? Could someone has helped her, orchestrating the perfect crime ?

Even the strange deaths of cats found mutilated in her yard raised suspicion. Her family swore she adored animals. "*She wouldn't hurt a fly*," they said. "*She'd have just shooed it out the window*."

One piece of evidence stood out : a magnetic tape was played in court, where a low, menacing whisper could be heard :

—*Cindy, you're going to die!*

The courtroom froze. It felt like a scene out of *The Exorcist*. Yet even this sinister recording proved inconclusive.

For years, Cindy had lived through what could only be called a prolonged nightmare — a path strewn with anonymous phone calls, home invasions, arson, physical assaults. The phone would ring and fall silent, or hiss with threats and obscenities spoken in a breath like that of a dying man.

Her stalker had set two fires, cut her phone lines, broken into her house, and attacked her violently four times. Hoping for peace, she had moved to Richmond — but the horror followed her.

Despite all this, the police clung to a theory that turned Cindy's own mind into her murderer. Like a haunted figure from a Stephen King novel, she had, they claimed, conjured her own terror.

They insisted, though never proved, that the tormentor had been inside her all along.

The nightmare had begun on 7 October 1982 — just two months after the start of her divorce proceedings. On 15 October, a rock shattered her back door's glass pane, and an intruder entered. Nothing was stolen, but her pillow had been carefully shredded. Just four days later, someone entered her home with a key. They touched nothing — except the pillow.

And the nightmare only deepened from there.

Pat McBride, a Vancouver City Police investigator, lived in Cindy James' home from October 31 to December 1, 1982. He had needed temporary lodging, being, as he put it, "*between apartments*."

—*We were good friends*, McBride later said. *Our relationship lasted about a year*.

Interestingly, McBride reported receiving a *silent* phone call during his stay, on the night of January 15, 1983, while Cindy was in the house. He believed the caller might have been at the airport, as he faintly heard what sounded like a public address announcement during the silence. Though he had requested a wiretap from BC Tel, the caller did not remain on the line long enough to be traced. A partial location trace placed the call in Richmond, near

Vancouver International Airport. Still, as skeptics would later note, who in Canada hasn't received a silent call from time to time?

The first documented physical attack occurred on July 27, 1983. Cindy was found unconscious on the basement stairs of her home. A black stocking had been tied tightly around her neck, apparently in an attempt to strangle her. Her hands and feet bore shallow cuts. This marked the first appearance of a disturbing motif: the use of black stockings—a possible fetishistic signature of her alleged tormentor.

Initially, Cindy claimed she had been attacked from behind in the garage. But her credibility was quickly questioned: she failed two polygraph tests about the incident. Detective David Bowyer-Smyth, who first investigated the case, sensed she was withholding something—perhaps out of fear for herself or her family.

Eventually, she opened up. She suggested that the attacker had been Pat McBride, the officer who had once lived with her. "He was wearing a cap," she recalled. When she opened the door, the man stabbed at her with a knife—she managed to deflect the blow with her hand. He then dragged her to the rear of the garage where a second man was waiting. They threatened to gouge out her eyes and mutilate her breasts if she didn't stay silent. "They told me I'd die slowly. And if I didn't, they'd come back to finish the job." She also reported sexually charged threats against her sister.

Later, Cindy revised her story—shifting the scene from the garage to the front door, altering some of the details but not the core accusation. This inconsistency, and the fact that she had accused a police officer, gravely damaged her credibility.

On January 30, 1984, private investigator Ozzie Kaban received a panicked phone call from Cindy. Rushing to her house, he found the doors locked and had to break down the back door. Inside, he discovered her unconscious. A message made of letters cut from magazines was pinned to her hand by a knife blade driven nearly through the flesh. The note read: *"You must die now, C..."* Blood was smeared across the kitchen floor in circular patterns, which struck Officer Kiyo Ikoma—who later testified—as highly unusual. "In my career," he said, "I have never seen an attacker clean up blood before fleeing."

Following this episode, Cindy underwent another polygraph examination. The results initially indicated she was telling the truth. However, Sergeant Calvin Hood of the RCMP, who administered the test, later reinterpreted the findings as inconclusive. He said that, during a 45-minute interview after the test, Cindy disclosed episodes of domestic violence in her 16-year marriage to Dr. Roy Makepeace.

She recounted how he had once thrown a candy box at her in anger and had spoken of killing people with a crossbow. Makepeace, interrogated for five hours by the RCMP, categorically denied everything—though he admitted to slapping her on occasion, never after their divorce. He lamented that he was being scapegoated for all of Cindy's misfortunes, which nearly cost him his position as head of health services at BC Hydro.

The incidents continued. Cindy told police that a man—possibly a neighbor— entered her home through the back door and struck her on the head. On July 23, 1984, while walking her dog in Dunbar Park, she was attacked again. She vaguely recalled being abducted in a van after a man approached asking for directions. She said two men injected her with drugs.

To recover more details, Ozzie Kaban arranged for four hypnosis sessions. During the final session—attended by police—Cindy recounted a harrowing memory: in 1981, while sailing in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, she had witnessed her husband dismember a man and a woman with an axe in a cabin on a Canadian island. She couldn't remember the exact location. RCMP search efforts proved fruitless.

Following these allegations, investigators set up a wiretap operation to catch Makepeace in a confession. A call between Cindy and her ex-husband was recorded, in which he flatly denied any involvement, suggesting instead that she was succumbing to delusions born of revenge. Surveillance of Makepeace, Cindy, and two other unnamed suspects for seven days by fourteen officers yielded no results.

On August 21, 1985, a fire broke out in Cindy's basement bathroom. Officer Gary Foster testified that the break-in appeared staged: cobwebs and dust around the window frame were undisturbed. On April 16, 1986, another fire occurred—this time clearly set from within the house. Though police contemplated charging her with arson, they refrained, suspecting the act may have been a suicide attempt. Cindy was soon admitted to psychiatric care at St. Paul's Hospital and then briefly at Riverview.

In April 1989, just weeks before her disappearance, ominous signs reappeared. A note was discovered at Richmond Hospital where she worked: *"Soon, Cindy! Soon!"* Later, someone scrawled *"Sleep well!"* in the dust on her windshield, written upside-down to be read from inside.

Dr. Roy Makepeace claimed Cindy suffered from dissociative identity disorder. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Wesley Friesen,

disagreed, suggesting instead that she lived on the borderline between neurosis and reality—a state likely rooted in early childhood trauma. He diagnosed her with borderline personality disorder and described her as "the perfect victim," since her condition wasn't outwardly obvious.

Dr. Antony Marcus, a forensic psychiatrist consulted by police in late 1985, echoed this view. Having reviewed her case files and interviewed her twice, he told the inquest that she straddled the line between mental illness and lucidity. Her fragile state, he theorized, could have originated from a past sexual assault, though he did not press her for details. Marcus warned that she was nearing the edge of a breakdown—"still on the side of life," he said, "but she could lose her balance at any moment."

—*Cindy James cast herself as the victim in a phantasmagoric drama of her own invention,* Marcus remarked. *She was living a nightmare. Whether the terror came from within or without, it was real."*

He added that she may have experienced partial amnesia following some of the more than 90 incidents reported to police. He also noted her intense need for attention and validation, saying she could be manipulative and dishonest.

For comparison, police cited a similar case investigated by the FBI in Wichita, Kansas. There, between 1977 and 1981, a woman reported repeated acts of harassment and violence, often finding a piece of red scarf at the scene. She was later caught mailing herself threatening letters. Her defense: she was truly a victim, reliving trauma from a childhood abuse episode in which her attacker had stuffed a red scarf down her throat to silence her screams.

In Cindy James' case, it was not a scarf, but a black nylon stocking. One had been found tightly wrapped around her neck on four separate occasions. Dr. Allan Connelly, Cindy's longtime psychiatrist, generally believed his patient's claims. He did not consider her "*psychotic in the clinical sense*." With visible discomfort, he stated that if it were proven Cindy had committed arson, he would have to revise both his diagnosis and her treatment, as he had been treating her *solely for depression*.

Investigator Janette Fisher revealed that Dr. Wesley Friesen, a psychiatrist at St. Paul's Hospital, had suggested that Cindy suffered from *dissociative identity disorder* — or, as if that weren't dramatic enough, *multiple personalities*. According to Friesen, Cindy "*wanted to distance herself from her destructive side by beginning a new life under a different name in a different city*." This, he claimed, explained why she never reverted to her maiden name after separating from Roy Makepeace.

Dr. Westley Friesen further alleged that Cindy and the private investigator, Ozzie Kaban, had entered into a "*conditional agreement*" under which *Kaban would receive a $30,000 reward if Makepeace was ever imprisoned*. Kaban flatly denied the existence of any such arrangement. Cindy's family lawyer, Peter Leask, strongly criticized [Investigator] Janette Fisher's testimony as prejudicial. He insisted that the strict rules of evidence —those recognized in a court of law— did not permit vague suppositions or statements like "*I believe*" or "*I think*."

Mental health experts testified on both sides, but their contradictory analyses contributed little to the investigation. If they failed to clarify the facts, they at least managed to distract the audience.

The investigation into Cindy James' death lasted forty days and cost the government approximately $1.5 million. At its conclusion, the coroner's jury found no definitive evidence of suicide or murder. They concluded that *Cindy had died from "an unknown event," likely an overdose of morphine and the sedative Flurazepam*. Yet they were unable to determine whether her death had been the result of foul play, suicide, or a tragic accident. This inconclusiveness devastated Cindy's family and friends, many of whom remained convinced that she had been murdered by a sadist clever enough to stage her death as suicide.

Just five days before she disappeared, Cindy wrote a letter to her youngest sister, Melanie Cassidy, who lived in Whitehorse [Yukon]. Melanie received the letter the day after Cindy's death. It offered no hint of despair or impending doom. On the contrary, Cindy sounded optimistic : she believed she had finally found a way to catch whoever was terrorizing her. Perhaps she was only speaking of making her husband suffer, the very man who tormented her with his presence in her anguish.

—I continue to be harassed from time to time by someone trying to break into my home, but I think we've found a solution. If it doesn't cost too much, Gord will install a motion detector for me. That way, we'll know if someone enters the backyard, and we can call the police while he's still there. I'm hopeful we'll catch him soon. Wouldn't that be wonderful ? Maybe I could finally start living a normal life again. I've almost forgotten what that feels like. The police have been nearly useless — it would be wonderful to deliver this guy to them on a silver platter. Well, I'll stop here, I have to get ready — Marion is coming to pick me up.

That Thursday afternoon, May 25, just hours before her disappearance, Marion Christensen called Cindy to say she and her

husband were leaving for Vancouver Island. Cindy, who was now working at *Richmond General Hospital*, seemed cheerful. She told Marion she had five days off and would be attending a birthday party for Adrien, the eight-year-old son of her close friend Doreene Sutton — whom Cindy once called "*the sister I never had*." A statement that, while endearing, couldn't have pleased her real sister, Melanie Cassidy.

Cindy also mentioned that someone had recently tried to break into her house again. She said *"her intuition was warning her more insistently each day that something was about to happen*," Marion Christensen later recalled. Cindy had even gone to *The Bay* at Richmond Mall for a makeover — something she hadn't done in a long time. She was dealing with skin problems and had sought advice on makeup.

For years, private investigator Ozzie Kaban had worked alongside the official police research. He conducted his own surveillance, monitored Cindy's home, and installed complex electronic systems to catch the person tormenting her. Cindy wanted to buy a gun for protection, but Ozzie Kaban discouraged her, knowing she was unfamiliar with firearms. Was he afraid she might accidentally harm herself — or even him ?

In his closing argument, Leask reminded the jury that Cindy had suffered recurring nightmares since childhood. She would wake up screaming, dreaming of snakes slithering up from the basement to attack her. As she grew older, the snakes became nightmarish hands reaching to seize her. During psychiatric assessments, she described seeing birds tearing each other apart in *Rorschach inkblots*, or, when viewing predominantly red images, firefighters trying to put out fires with hoses that bled instead of water.

The jurors were shown graphic videos of Cindy's decomposed body, swarmed by flies. Another video showed the autopsy table, her blackened face partially skeletal. An entomologist from Simon Fraser University testified about maggot colonies in Cindy's body, trying to determine how long her corpse had been at the location where it was discovered.

Jurors were also told of investigations into Richmond skinhead and Satanist groups, following a theory from the family that Cindy may have been murdered in a *ritual killing*. The horrific details left jurors and journalists alike disturbed. Some couldn't sleep. They began to wonder: Had Cindy stabbed herself ? Could she really have strangled herself to unconsciousness with a nylon stocking ? Some jurors reported nightmares — visions of body parts dismembered by Cindy's ex-husband and stuffed into garbage cans. Others heard a voice repeating in their minds : "*Cindy, you're going to die soon…*" whispered syllable by syllable, like a sadistic chant.

Officer Janette Fisher, who investigated the first arson attack, was convinced that Cindy —despite all the alarms, detectors, and locks that fortified her home— had staged it herself. But she refused to file charges, pitying a woman she believed to be suicidal.

—*Cindy wanted her ex-husband charged,* she claimed. *She set the stage for the perfect murder, casting herself as a sacrificial lamb. She hated him so much, she would have done anything to destroy him. She wanted to fabricate the perfect crime and frame him for it*.

In his closing, Leask urged the jury to rely on facts, not speculation. He recommended an "*open verdict*" and suggested the

case be reassigned to a new, experienced investigative team. The jury, unconvinced, declined.

Lawyer Katherine Kinahan, representing the *Vancouver City Police,* maintained that the investigators believed Cindy James had either taken her own life or died of an accidental overdose.

—*There is no point in reopening this case*, she said. *No new evidence will be found.* She ended her plea with a resounding "*Enough is enough !*"

Dr. Roy Makepeace, Cindy James's ex-husband, added bitterly :

—*I went through eight years of hell.*

He had been interrogated for over five hours after the first attacks. He was placed under constant surveillance, both by the police and Kaban's agents. Fearing for his life, he began sleeping with loaded guns at his bedside. Visitors to his home had to press the letter "R" on his intercom before he would even answer. He had spent thousands on legal fees, alimony, and losses incurred while suspending his medical practice. He also blamed Cindy's therapists: "*The psychiatrists' role over these eight years*, he said, *was nothing but a farce*."

Cindy James' death remains one of the most confounding mysteries in Canadian legal history — a textbook case of judicial stalemate. The evidence was too weak to prove suicide, accident, or murder. "*Cindy James died as a result of an unknown event*," the jury concluded after forty days of proceedings — the longest in British Columbia's history. The only certainty was that she died

from a scientifically confirmed overdose of morphine and Flurazepam.

—*We accept the verdict, but we are disappointed*, said her father, Otto Hack. *We had hoped for something definitive. But the complexity of this case made that impossible*. He added, *We lost a daughter and a sister. Unless you've experienced that, you can't understand.*

Otto's wife, Matilda, was especially devastated. A retired lieutenant-colonel, Otto continued to believe his daughter was murdered. "

—*It's too soon to say whether we'll take legal action against the RCMP,* he said. *For now, we just want to rest. My wife and I will be taking a cruise through the Inner Passage and visiting our other daughter in Whitehorse. We see a glimmer of light now. Perhaps life can return to normal.*

Coroner Gérald Tilley informed the court that psychological support would be made available to all those who participated in the inquest, including jurors.

Cindy James —who had devoted her life to helping troubled children— was, by all accounts, a kind and dedicated woman. In the end, she may have sacrificed her life out of hatred for a man she still loved. For between love and hate, there is only a single, perilous step — and she may have taken it without ever realizing it.

In this tragic case, the horror seems to have taken root not in a shadowy figure outside, but in the depths of the victim's own mind.

The ill-Fated Voyage of The TONQUIN

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, a handful of American entrepreneurs resolved to challenge the hegemony of Canada's two dominant fur-trading powers —the *Hudson's Bay Company* and the *North West Company*— by launching their own enterprise on the Pacific Coast. Their eyes were fixed on the vast and contested expanse of Oregon Territory, an immense region of nearly one million square kilometers encompassing present-day Oregon, Washington, and much of British Columbia.

This immense wilderness was then under joint Anglo-American administration, and both nations were maneuvering to entrench their commercial presence before any formal partition took place. While the Canadians had already constructed *Fort Vancouver* at the mouth of the Columbia River —some 300 km south of what the city of Vancouver is now— it is no wonder that an ambitious New Yorker, John Jacob Astor, decided to establish a rival outpost in the same region. The Columbia River and its tributaries, after all, could channel much of the rich fur trade flowing from the Rocky Mountains.

Astor, a young Jewish immigrant from the village of Walldorf in Germany, had recently founded the American Fur Company with the backing of several co-religionists. Arriving in New York with little more than a few dollars and immense resolve, he would soon become the most successful financier in the United States. His descendants would go on to own *The Times* of London

from 1922 to 1966 and preside over a network of luxury hotels. A town in Oregon still bears his name. Historians such as Carroll Quigley and Clive Ponting have noted that Astor also financed influential *think tanks* that promoted a geopolitical alliance between a declining Britain and an ascendant United States.

In 1810, Astor chartered a modest vessel of 290 tons —the *TONQUIN*— outfitted with ten guns and a crew of twenty. Among them were thirteen French-Canadian voyageurs, seasoned coureurs-de-bois of the North, whose skill and endurance were prized across the continent. Of the sixteen passengers on board, twelve were accountants, several of whom were also French Canadians. These men were not idle scribes but vital to the logistical and trade operations of the post Astor intended to found.

Command of the ship was given to Jonathan Thorn, a U.S. naval officer whose surname soon proved prophetic. A rigid disciplinarian, Thorn ruled with an iron fist. On land, he was obsequiously deferential to his superiors; at sea, he became a petty tyrant, reserving particular disdain for his French-Canadian subordinates, whom he treated with undisguised contempt. He saw in their rustic appearance —woolen capotes, leather gaiters, and moose-hide moccasins— not seasoned voyageurs, but savages. Their belts bristled with knives, tobacco pouches, and amulets, making them look to his eyes more like marauding pirates than traders.

These men had journeyed by canoe from Montreal, paddling southward along the Rivière Richelieu before portaging to the Hudson and descending to New York. Dutch settlers along the riverbanks had watched in astonishment as these hardy rowers glided past, singing ancient French ballads to the beat of their paddles.

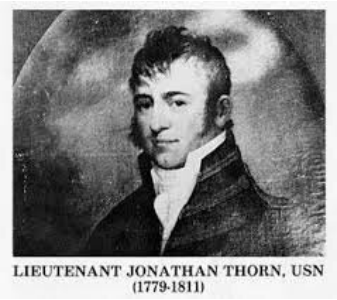
From the outset, Thorn's autocratic style clashed violently with the independent spirit of his French-Canadian crew. His arrogance was exceeded only by his intolerance. Even today, it is said that no one in North America resents authority quite like the French Canadians. And these men, seasoned by rapids and portages, did not suffer fools lightly.

They smoked foul tobacco, sang guttural chants incomprehensible to Thorn's ears —though nominally in French— and invoked the names of saints and sinners alike in a riot of blasphemy. When the *TONQUIN* finally left New York on September 10, 1810, and met the rolling swells of the Atlantic, the entire French-Canadian contingent succumbed to seasickness. Thorn, seething with disdain, was left nearly alone to haul the capstan.

Astor had not chosen a multicultural crew out of benevolence. He knew that in dealing with Indigenous nations, especially in the Pacific Northwest, the French Canadians were unrivaled. Chinook, a trade pidgin blending French and Indigenous words, had become the *lingua franca* of the western tribes and fur brigades alike. No trading company could succeed without the *voyageurs*, no matter how grudgingly they were hired. Their cultural legacy remains so enduring that *NASA* would one day name a space exploration program in their honor: *Voyager*.

By the time the *TONQUIN* approached the Falkland Islands for fresh water and provisions before rounding Cape Horn, Thorn's contempt had only deepened. The French Canadians, fully recovered from their nausea, were now devouring the ship's supplies with a hunger born of wilderness life. At the Falklands, they scattered across the archipelago on unauthorized hunting forays, leaving Thorn fuming in helpless rage.

Once reunited, the crew resumed their voyage and made for the Hawaiian archipelago. There, Thorn hoped to acquire livestock, fruit, and vegetables to ward off scurvy, and perhaps establish political and commercial ties. The idyllic setting, however, proved too enticing for the coureurs de bois, who rapidly transformed from woodsmen into seducers. Many Hawaiian families today trace their ancestry to these brief but passionate encounters.



LIEUTENANT JONATHAN THORN, USN
(1779-1811)

(Priv. Coll)

On February 28, 1811, the *TONQUIN* set sail once more. Commander Thorn, now more irascible than ever, had forbidden the French Canadians to speak their language —and the Irish their Gaelic— fearing a mutiny was brewing. His paranoia soared as tensions rose.

By March 22, the *TONQUIN* had arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River. But here, nature raised her own barrier. A ferocious bar —a treacherous shoal stirred by Pacific tides— guarded the entrance. On one side, a rocky promontory loomed; on the other, a long sandy spit traced by the relentless coastal current. Thorn now stood at the threshold of the continent's wildest edge, haunted by disobedience behind him and danger ahead.

After observing the menacing turbulence that obstructed the mouth of the great river, Commander Thorn resolved to dispatch a boat with a quartermaster and three French Canadians to sound the seabed and search for a channel through the treacherous sandbar. He needed to determine whether the *TONQUIN* might successfully pass the obstacle.

All eyes aboard followed the tiny boat with mounting dread. Though battered and unfit, the craft managed to approach the swirling waters—only to meet catastrophe. Tossed about like a straw, it capsized and vanished beneath the waves, men and vessel swallowed whole with no hope of rescue. From the bridge, Thorn looked on, cold and impassive. It was a cruel age, when the lives of subordinates held little weight, and employers, more often than not, were protected by law from any accountability. Only the families of the lost grieved, and yet—as voyages could last for years—there was always hope that a beloved face might still return.

Commander Thorn thus abandoned his plan to build a trading post at the river's mouth. Fort Astoria would instead rise a few miles away, exposed directly to the furious breakers of the Pacific.

On June 5th, Thorn decided to leave part of his crew ashore with the amiable Hawaiian women and sail for Vancouver Island. He took with him only twenty-three men and a single interpreter — a French Métis named Lamazée— to initiate contact with the local Salish tribes.

The ship anchored soon after in the sheltered waters of Clayoquot Fjord, at Port Newiti. The next morning, Thorn laid out on the deck an assortment of knives, hooks, blankets, and axes. A flotilla of native canoes soon approached; their occupants eager to barter furs.

Thorn, ever calculating, believed he could cheaply acquire rich pelts. But he was quickly disabused of this illusion. These distant tribes, hidden deep within the fjords of the Pacific Northwest, were no fools. They knew full well the worth of their furs.

Talks stalled. Thorn's offers were rebuffed with disdain, and Chief Nukamis's counterproposals only served to enrage the commander. In a burst of fury, Thorn lunged at Nukamis, tore the otter skin from his hands, and kicked violently at the piles of furs on deck. Furious, the chief returned to shore.

That night, several French Canadians warned the English Captain that revenge was certain — but Thorn, arrogant and overconfident in his ship's ten small cannons, refused to depart.

At dawn, a cedar canoe approached with about twenty smiling, *unarmed* natives. They were allowed aboard by the officer of the watch, who welcomed them upon seeing the furs they carried. One canoe was followed by another, and another, each bringing *unarmed* warriors offering ever finer pelts for common trade goods. The watch officer, unaware of the trap, continued exchanging weapons —axes, knives, blades— for furs. Thorn was in the process of selling weapons to those who were preparing to kill him.

By the time Thorn arrived on deck, drawn by the commotion, the *TONQUIN* swarmed with warriors fingering their freshly acquired weapons.

—*Clear this deck at once !* Thorn barked.

It was the worst possible order — especially delivered with such violence. At once, a newly gained hatchet split the skull of the ship's mate. He plunged into the sea, where women waiting in boats finished him off with knives. Chief Cheouiche sprang upon Thorn to avenge the insult of the day before, but the commander stabbed him fatally with his dagger. A vicious melee erupted.

Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the crew fought with desperate energy. Seeing their leader fall, another warrior crushed Thorn's skull in retaliation, ending his life ingloriously on this remote edge of the world.

The battle raged on. Axes and sabers hacked through flesh, skulls shattered, limbs torn from sockets. The deck, awash in blood, became slick with the bodies of the slain and the dying — men whispering prayers in Salish, French, English or Gaelic, as they awaited their fate.

A few sailors managed to mount swiveling spingole cannons on the railings. The blasts cleared the deck momentarily of both white and native combatants. Each man fought for his own survival. The light artillery restored order, if not peace. The remaining natives dove into the sea and were paddled away by the women.

The rest of the day and night passed in grim silence. The *TONQUIN*, its sails half-lowered and tattered, floated like a ghost ship, its crew tending to wounds or lying still. The wind thrashed the rigging with erratic violence, as if echoing the chaos of the day.

Entrance of the Columbia River. (Priv. Coll)

At dawn, a few cautious canoes crept alongside. In one sat Lamazée, the Métis interpreter, captured but spared. Through him, we know the truth of what happened next.

Lewis, the ship's secretary, appeared alone on deck. Slowly, calmly, he waved as if to welcome the natives once again. Lamazée's canoe was the first to approach. Others followed. The warriors boarded; weapons hidden beneath bundles of fur. Still wary, they suspected a trap — but nothing stopped them. Soon, the deck was once more crowded with native warriors, marveling at their luck, believing the ship ripe for plunder.

Lewis had vanished — after locking himself inside the powder magazine.

Then, with a roar like the end of the world, the *TONQUIN* was torn asunder. A colossal explosion lifted timbers, bodies, and debris high into the sky. The powder magazine had detonated.

Splintered wood, limbs, and shattered corpses rained down upon the canoes and into the fjord. Over a hundred natives perished instantly. Many more survived, but horribly maimed. For years, the Salish people would remember the cursed ship and its terrible vengeance.

That same day, four sailors were discovered in a secluded cove. They told Lamazée how the survivors had escaped by night, hoping to reach *Fort Astoria* by way of the *Strait of Juan de Fuca*.

Lewis, gravely wounded during the earlier fight, had refused to join them. Knowing he was doomed, he chose to die taking as many enemies with him as possible.

The four men were later captured and perished under unspeakable torture.

Lamazée alone survived to recount the terrible fate of the *TONQUIN*.

The TONQUIN under attack. [Priv.Coll.]

The bridge that consumed so many lives
August 29, 1907

On the afternoon of August 29, 1907, the sun blazed in the cloudless sky over Quebec City. Along the banks of the St. Lawrence River, spectators silently admired the immense construction site on the south shore, in Saint-Romuald. The decision to build the new Quebec Bridge ten kilometers upstream from the Old Capital city of New France had been taken for several reasons — chief among them, the narrowing of the river at that point and a desire not to mar Quebec's majestic skyline with a mass of steel girders.

Quebecers still remembered the controversy raging in Paris, where an active campaign sought the demolition of the Eiffel Tower—considered by many Parisians an eyesore defacing their beloved capital.

On both shores of the great river, masonry abutments stretched out like open arms toward the shimmering current. The south cantilever had already begun to reach over the water. Curious onlookers arrived from all directions, eager to witness the creation of what would be, when completed, the longest bridge in the world—longer even than the great cantilever bridge in Scotland. Locals dreamed of the day when they could cross their river on dry land, as if it were midwinter. The ferry would become obsolete. A man from Lévis might visit his aunt Hortense in Sillery without ever boarding a boat. It seemed nearly magical.

Moreover, the Canadian Pacific Railway would finally reach Quebec City proper. Passengers would disembark at the new station in the Old Capital, aptly named Champlain Station.

Mount Godard arrived from Philadelphia by train via Montreal. The line ended on the south bank, less than two hundred metres from the bridge. He had come to see the marvel with his own eyes. He had pored over every article in every newspaper he could find. He knew that the bridge's deck would rise proudly 45 metres above the highest tide. No less than 89,990 tons of steel would be required to complete the structure.

This extraordinary feat of engineering would support two railway tracks, a dual carriageway for horse-drawn vehicles, and two pedestrian walkways—all on a single level. Godard's head swirled with numbers.

He tried to grasp the immensity of the piers, each composed of 25,515 cubic meters of cement. They were constructed from a blend of granite and concrete. The foundations, complex in design, had demanded months of painstaking labor. The very caissons alone had taken six months to build, each one weighing nearly 74 tons. By this point in construction, the connecting structures already held 10,500 cubic meters of cement and rose nearly 17 meters above the river. Some 3,000 cubic meters of masonry formed the bridge's anchorages—two massive limbs gripping the north and south shores.

According to an April report from the House of Commons, the project had already consumed $4,415,598—a staggering sum. Peter Davis had estimated that approach works alone accounted for $734,000. Engineers' salaries made up 14% of the cost, a total of

$628,000—an astronomical figure compared to the meagre wages paid to laborers.

The Blackwell Island Bridge in New York, though designed for heavier traffic, bore less weight than this one. Its 355-metre span made it similar in concept, but not in scale. And far away in Scotland, the famous Forth Bridge remained the longest cantilever span in existence—yet its structure differed significantly from what was taking shape here in Quebec.

Godard was intoxicated by the statistics. He knew the bridge better than many of the men who worked on it—perhaps better even than the American chief engineer in New York, who, astonishingly, had shown no desire to visit the site in person.

Now, at last, Godard stood before the structure that had haunted his imagination. It stirred the same global fascination as the Millau Viaduct would evoke a century later, that towering marvel in the French Massif Central, whose concrete pylons would eventually surpass even the height of the Eiffel Tower.

Testimony and Tragedy at the Quebec Bridge

—It was just before the end of the workday… I felt something shift… Then, slowly, the enormous steel bridge began to give way at the edge of the deep water and the tidal flats. The movement accelerated… and suddenly, under its own immense weight, the entire superstructure collapsed into the St. Lawrence River with a terrifying roar. It all happened in a matter of seconds… We knew the end had come… I clearly remember the plunge into hell and the monstrous noise—but then I lost consciousness. I recall nothing more until I found myself wedged between two steel beams. I

realized it was a fight for survival. I managed to free my head and screamed for help."

A few minutes later, a boat arrived. *It reached me*, and *I must have fainted again, for the next thing I remember is waking up on dry land.*

John Adams, about forty years old, spoke these words through a mask of pain. His face was contorted with suffering. But physical agony was not the only torment he endured — every survivor was also haunted by a cruel reality : *in those unforgiving times, the loss of a limb meant dismissal from employment*. Moral considerations were irrelevant. It was still the brutal capitalism of the Industrial Revolution. A worker who was no longer profitable was simply cast aside. A doctor, noticing Adams's critical condition, invited the journalist to step away to let him rest.

At the time of the collapse, not far downstream, the steamer *Glenmount* was sailing from Montreal to Sydney, Nova Scotia. Its pilot, David Perrault, confirmed that there had been a violent tremor just as his ship passed beneath the looming bridge. In fact, the *Glenmount* had narrowly cleared the structure before it collapsed behind it. According to all accounts, the upheaval was enormous. The resulting wave crashed against nearby vessels and drove them off course, while a cloud of dust and spray hung over the disaster site for nearly ten minutes. As soon as Captain Muir realized what had occurred, he ordered lifeboats launched and dropped anchor. His crew searched for survivors, but despite their efforts, they found none.

Shortly after, the *Irene* —a steamer operated by the *REO Navigation Company* on the Montréal–Québec route— passed the wreckage. Captain Baker later reported that when he had left

Québec, the mood among the people was one of shared despair. By the time he reached the remains of the bridge, it had been reduced to a twisted, formless heap, as though crushed by a titanic hand. Baker heard no cries for help.

Captain Knig's tug, the *Hackett*, was dispatched to the scene by J.U. Gregory, a representative of the *Department of Marine and Fisheries*, as soon as news reached Québec. The vessel was equipped with powerful lamps that aided the search efforts as night fell.

"The slow death of the workers trapped on the Québec Bridge, caught like rats in a tangle of twisted beams, watching helplessly as the merciless tide rose towards them." (Priv. Coll.)

On August 30, the Minister of Marine and Fisheries received word from Quebec agents that river traffic would not be affected. The bridge had fallen into forty-five meters of water, and there was no need even to mark the channel. That evening, navigation resumed. This was crucial, as several transatlantic liners were expected the next day, including the *Southwark* of the Dominion

Line from Liverpool, the *Sardinian* of the Allan Line from Le Havre, and the *Virginian*, bound for Montréal.

Charles F. Conard —an American whose name bore a touch of tragic irony— served as private secretary to Chief Engineer J.S. Deans. He defended the company with a zeal bordering on religious fervor, as if protecting his mother's honour.

—*The care of the wounded was our first concern*, he declared. *Without waiting to assess material losses, the company ordered that no effort or expense be spared to aid the injured.*

Other officials echoed Conard's statement. Yet the *American Pontoon Company*'s regard for worker safety was so minimal that it could not even produce a list of employees present on the day of the collapse. After much debate, it was estimated that seventy-five men had been on the bridge. By 11 a.m. the following morning, sixty-one were still missing, six were unharmed, and fourteen bodies had been recovered.

Among the dead were many skilled laborers from the *Phoenix Bridge Company of Pennsylvania*, as well as unskilled workers from Québec — including fifty Mohawk ironworkers from the Kahnawake reserve near Montréal. At the time, French Canadians, within Canada's colonial social hierarchy, occupied the lowest-paid, subordinate roles. All senior federal officials were English-speaking. Québec remained, in effect, a colony until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960^{s}.

Six Iroquois workers who had quarreled with their foreman that morning and left the worksite at noon were among the few who escaped death.

By September 2, the search effort began to wane, to the despair of families who knew that their loved ones' bodies were still entombed beneath the river. Federal tugs withdrew from the area. Despite three days of intensive surveillance, no further remains were discovered. Journalists concluded that most of the missing were still trapped in the tangled wreckage, forty-five meters below the surface.

The recovered bodies were released for burial by Coroner Jolicoeur. The coroner's jury visited the disaster site and spent hours examining the remnants of the bridge before adjourning the inquiry.

The mayor of Québec City, Georges Garneau, convened a citizens' committee to consider legal action. Several of the victims were buried in Saint-Romuald on September 1st. A massive crowd attended the funerals, and the ceremony was deeply moving.

While many were mourning, others, such as Frank T. Davis —treasurer of the Phoenix Bridge Company— sought to shield the firm's reputation. Like Conard, Davis tried to exonerate the company and reassure shareholders :

—*There will be no loss for us*, he declared without shame, *except in terms of time. Our equipment is fully insured. The company's reputation and business will not suffer. No one can identify the cause of the collapse until engineers inspect the bridge. There were no design flaws, no construction errors. No rivet was placed without an engineer's order. This was one of the most meticulously executed works in the world*.

It was total absolution in three strokes of the sprinkler.

Chief Engineer John Stan Deans added:

—We know no more than what the newspapers have reported. The steel was ours, and we sent our best specialists to supervise. Something unknown went wrong. The design is simple; it's all a matter of calculation. This method has been used before —other bridges are being built this way— but nothing has approached this scale. Ours was the largest bridge in the world.

As the families buried their dead and the Americans defended their legacy, theories swirled. A Hamilton newspaper wrote on August 30 :

—While authorities give no official explanation, an executive at the Hamilton Bridge Company suspects a defective piece of steel may have triggered the disaster. Was the span too long? I don't think so. The tension between beams was surely well calculated. Since the piers and abutments remain intact, perhaps a single faulty piece or a misaligned element was to blame.

A Quebec paper speculated :

—The main cantilever arm may have been too weak to bear the massive tension.

John Butler, Assistant Deputy Minister of Railways, left the disaster site on the 3:30 p.m. train and met in Montréal with Henry Holgate, appointed federal investigator. S.N. Parent, president of the Transcontinental Railway, believed the Phoenix Bridge Company had rushed the project. A possible theory emerged: *a locomotive may have driven a load of steel beams onto the bridge before all rivets were secured, triggering the collapse*. This was to be examined by the inquiry commission.

Others noted that one of the massive support chains appeared bent, possibly indicating overstress. Parent concluded that Phoenix was to blame and should bear the financial consequences.

But who was truly responsible? Would truth emerge from the haze of theories, each colored by self-interest?

It all began in the summer of 1897, when the celebrated consulting engineer Theodore Cooper visited Quebec for the annual *Convention of the American Society of Civil Engineers*. Impressed by the site, he offered his expertise to the *Quebec Bridge Company.* Cooper was widely respected, and since the company's own chief engineer, Edward A. Hoare, had never worked on a bridge over 100 meters, they eagerly hired Cooper as a consultant.

Who was this Cooper, whose miscalculations brought such tragedy?

Born in 1839, Cooper earned his engineering degree from the prestigious *Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute* in 1858. After three years of unsuccessful job searching, he joined the U.S. Navy in 1861 as assistant engineer on the gunboat *Chocura*, fighting Southerners during the *Civil War*. He later taught at the *U.S. Naval Academy* and served in the South Pacific before resigning in 1872 to inspect steel trusses in Missouri.

His career soared after overseeing the *St. Louis Bridge* — the longest cantilever bridge of its time— without error. He founded his New York firm in 1878 and took on major projects: the *Seekonk Bridge* in Providence, the *6th Street Bridge* in Pittsburgh, and New York's *2nd Avenue Bridge*.

In his old age, Cooper sought a final, crowning achievement : the longest cantilever span in the world, surpassing even *Scotland's Forth Bridge*. *At 68, he announced the Québec Bridge as the grand finale of his career*. If completed, he would be over 80 at the inauguration — at a time when the average American lived only to 45. It was to be the final bouquet of fireworks at the end of his long professional life.

Instead, it became his epitaph.

At that time, the federal government —still years away from the "*stroke of genius*" that would introduce *income tax*— granted subsidies only in dribs and drabs. Nearly two years passed before Cooper's agreement with the Québec Bridge Company, established in 1887 by an Act of Parliament, was implemented.

The plans were sent —through the Phoenix Bridge Company of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania— to Cooper in New York, along with the Québec Bridge Company's financial records. Cooper, naturally, was eager to know whether the company could afford the enormous fees he intended to demand. To generate additional profits, the Quebec Bridge Company awarded the Phoenix Bridge Company the lucrative contract to fabricate the steel components required for the giant superstructure.

It was *then* that engineer Theodore Cooper committed a fatal and inexcusable blunder. Advanced age may have played a role in this catastrophic lapse of judgment. He unilaterally altered the span of the bridge and the distance between its piers, without adjusting the plans from which the Phoenix Bridge Company was to cast the girders and structural elements. The calculations for the bridge's critical load-bearing components were thereby rendered entirely invalid.

Moreover, the construction of what would become the longest cantilever bridge in the world required fresh experimental testing — yet no new tests were conducted. The plans for earlier cantilever bridges were relied upon, and during the long dormancy between 1900 and 1903, nothing was done. The Phoenix Bridge Company saw no reason to invest in costly research that might never yield returns, and the Quebec Bridge Company lacked the funds — funds that had yet to be approved by Parliament. It was thought that Cooper's genius alone would guarantee success. It did not.

In 1903 —sixteen years after the company's founding— the federal government finally approved preliminary funding. The two companies at last finalized their contract. It was, as they say, time to strike while the iron was hot, while the government's purse was still open. Engineers dusted off the outdated plans, and in haste, Cooper forwarded them —unchanged— to Phoenixville. No tests were conducted to assess the new weight of the remodeled bridge. Cooper, indifferent, simply accepted the *Phoenix Bridge Company*'s estimates.

Even more astonishing negligence —highlighted, like the rest, by the *Royal Commission of Inquiry*— was Cooper's near-total absence from the construction site. In the three years leading up to the disaster, he visited only three times. His final visit, in 1903, marked the end of his on-site involvement. Thereafter, he declined all further invitations with the excuse that his health did not permit travel. "*My doctor has advised against it*," he claimed.

Thus, Cooper directed the construction of what was meant to be the *crowning achievement* of his career from the comfort of his office in Manhattan. Today, such remote supervision might be conceivable thanks to digital tools. In the early twentieth century,

however, it was nothing short of dereliction. To justify his laziness, Cooper feigned infirmity. But in truth, despite his age, he traveled daily by horse-drawn carriage from the southern tip of Manhattan to his home on West 57th Street. His supposed influenza and fatigue were deliberate fabrications. He had even ensured that his contract limited site visits to a maximum of five per month. When *the Quebec Bridge Company* asked him to honor that minimum, he retorted that five visits was not a requirement but a *limit*, and, due to his "health," even that number was merely theoretical.

Theodore Cooper
Railway Engineering and Maintenance, Volume 15, Issue 10, 1919. Digitized By Google

Yet Cooper's "*chronic fatigue*" proved highly selective. In the summer of 1903, he traveled to Ottawa to oppose efforts by Schreiber, a Government engineer, who sought to award his own firm the contract to revise the bridge plans. Conflicts of interest were not condemned as they are today. Cooper demanded and secured complete, unconditional control over the project. He removed all dissenting voices.

This proved disastrous : stripped of independent oversight, Cooper was free to commit egregious errors. He delegated site supervision to a young engineer, Norman McLure, while he remained in New York. The result : critical calculations concerning the bridge's weight were neglected entirely.

Three years later, the first warning signs appeared. The *Phoenix Bridge Company*'s materials inspector, Mr. Edwards, sent an urgent report to New York. The steel being installed had already exceeded estimated weights, and the trusses were under dangerous

stress. Cooper dismissed the report with disdain. What were these underlings whining about ?

Civil engineers bear immense responsibility — because their errors lead not only to failures but to death.

In 1940, for example, the mighty suspension bridge across the Tacoma Strait collapsed after only four months. A violent wind caused the bridge deck to twist and ripple like a ribbon, until it tore itself apart and hurled motorists to their deaths.

By 1907, Québec's own bridge was nearing the breaking point. It had begun to deform. In mid-June, Cooper, seated comfortably in his New York office, read a report from McLure. It noted a curious problem: when workers tried to rivet the beams of the southern anchor arm, the steel chords were inexplicably too short or too long. The holes no longer aligned. On four occasions, a 75-ton hydraulic jack had been needed just to force the pieces together.

—*Do your best*, Cooper replied. *It's nothing serious. Proceed with the riveting before the deck's full weight bears down on the frames.*

His evasive answer resolved nothing. By August 21, the holes in the 9L chord were misaligned by two centimeters; a week later, the gap had grown to 5.5 centimeters. McLure, alarmed but seemingly unaware of the full danger, did not telegram Cooper. He instead wrote a letter — though even by express post, it would take days to arrive.

On site, others were less complacent. Bill Yenser, the general foreman for Phoenix (and not an engineer), halted work, saying he feared for his life and those of his men. Chief Engineer

Edward Hoare of the Quebec Bridge Company objected. Delays meant losses, and he likely reminded Yenser that his job hung in the balance. Yielding to pressure, Bill Yenser reluctantly ordered construction to resume.

Managers knew a catastrophe was imminent. Fear gnawed at them. But the workers, trusting in their superiors, continued their labor with devotion.

After protracted debate, Hoare sent McLure to New York to warn Cooper directly. On August 29, shortly after 1:30 p.m., Cooper arrived at his Manhattan office and found both McLure and his letter waiting. At 12:15, he finally sent a telegram — not to Quebec, but to Phoenixville.

It read: "*Do not add any more metal charges to the reinforcement until the situation has been studied more satisfactorily. McLure will come to see you at 5 p.m.*"

Cooper later claimed he thought, based on McLure's letter, that work had already ceased. That's difficult to believe — McLure was standing right beside him. In his rush to catch a train, Cooper failed to send a telegram to Quebec as promised. He sought to shift blame. For reasons that remain unclear, McLure continued to cover for Cooper, whom he admired deeply.

Work continued uninterrupted in Quebec all afternoon. Cooper's telegram reached Phoenixville at the end of the day. John Deans, the local manager, glanced at it, assumed Quebec had already been informed, and filed it away.

At 5 p.m., McLure arrived. Deans and Szlapka arranged to meet him the next morning. Their informal meeting ended at 5:30

p.m. — the exact moment the Quebec Bridge collapsed like a house of cards.

The axe of incompetence had fallen. Dozens of workers perished in unspeakable agony. Parents, wives, and children mourned.

Mayor Pierre Garneau received condolences from France and England. Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier also received them, but swiftly insisted that the structure would soon be rebuilt. No time for self-pity.

Governor General Earl Grey sent a telegram to Lieutenant Governor Jetté. Laurier's message to Mayor Garneau read:

"*Please convey to the citizens of Quebec and to those who have lost relatives and friends my deepest sympathy for this tragic disaster. It is the duty of all not to lose heart. We must act at once to rebuild and push the project forward with energy*."

The verdict of the *Royal Commission*, which spent a year examining the disaster —but in truth seemed more interested in protecting two powerful American firms— was a masterclass in diplomacy and euphemism.

"*We are satisfied that no one directly or indirectly involved in the bridge's construction anticipated an immediate disaster*," the 1908 report claimed. "*We believe Mr. Cooper sincerely thought work had ceased, and that without added load, the bridge might have lasted days*."

To assign some blame, they selected a scapegoat: John Deans, reprimanded for poor judgment. *The Quebec Bridge*

Company was also criticized for appointing Edward Hoare —who lacked an engineering degree— as chief on-site engineer.

But the principal blame still fell on Theodore Cooper and Peter Szlapka. Cooper had reviewed and approved the flawed plans.

"*The failure cannot be attributed to any cause other than the errors in judgment by these two engineers*," the report concluded. "*The assumption that the bridge's own weight could not lead to collapse was a grave misjudgment — serious enough to warrant the bridge's condemnation*."

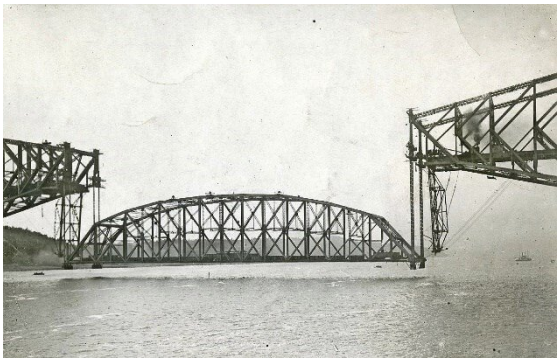
Theodore Cooper's career collapsed along with the Québec Bridge. He testified twice before the Royal Commission, speaking with candor and a touch of bitterness about both the Phoenix Bridge Company and the Quebec Bridge Company. His words sparked a storm of counteraccusations from the engineers of the two firms.

With the tragedy now behind him, Cooper retired. He died in his bed on August 24, 1919, at the venerable age of eighty. Ironically, his death occurred just two days after the official inauguration of the bridge that was meant to be the crowning achievement of his career — and had instead marked its ruin. One might wager that the news of the inauguration, and the inevitable reminders in the press of his negligence and failures, hastened his final breath.

In Canada, September 1916 brought the first touches of autumn, as its deft brush began to scorch the green summer foliage. Meanwhile, in Europe, the French had produced enough cannons and machine guns to make the goddess of war hesitate in choosing her victor. Despite this, the war against Germany raged on. The

offensive mounted by French strategists in the Balkans drew global attention far from the banks of the St. Lawrence.

But in Quebec, the long-awaited bridge was finally nearing completion. All that remained was to bolt the central span between the great cantilevers and inaugurate it with pomp and ceremony, an event presided over by Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, whose federal government had been the project's chief financier. Premier Lomer Gouin of Quebec, as a token of provincial participation, would be granted a folding seat.



Priv. Coll.

The second Quebec Bridge was virtually complete by Saturday, September 11, 1916. It was two and a half times heavier than its ill-fated predecessor. Towering proudly, without the need for extra reinforcement, it awaited the final touch — the placement of its central span and the ceremonial christening with champagne.

The last piece, the central span, would link the two cantilevers. Pride swelled in every heart —workers, engineers, families, Quebecers, and all Canadians— because this was not only a bridge: it was the largest cantilever bridge in the world. The longest ! Never in the history of Quebec had an event stirred such interest, such pride. The St. Lawrence teemed with boats of every size, filled with eager spectators crowding as near as they dared to this marvel.

The highest points on both banks were alive with spectators who had come by train, carriage, motor car, and on foot. The dusty road to Sainte-Foy had not seen such crowds since 1760, when British troops, flushed with enthusiasm, had rushed to confront General Lévis — before fleeing in panic before the bayonets of French Canadians. For hours, people jostled and hurried to witness the joining of the shores. Everyone felt they were living a page of Canadian history.

Before dawn, a vast armada of ships, boats, and yachts clustered near the bridge. Crowds had gathered at Sillery, for all knew that the giant raft carrying the central span would soon emerge from the port. At first, only the roars of the tugboats hinted that the operation had begun — the span itself remained invisible in the darkness. Then dawn broke, only to be immediately obscured by a thick and exasperating fog. When at last the sun pierced the mist, the crowd caught sight of the immense span —5,100 tons of steel, 33 metres tall, 24 metres wide, and 192 metres long— floating majestically on a platform of six enormous barges.

Like disciplined soldiers, the tugboats strained against their cables, towing the span toward the open space between the cantilevers. The *Druid*, the *Lady Evelyn* —carrying Marine Minister J. D. Hazen— and a hundred other vessels followed in procession.

The Government of Canada was officially represented by the Minister of Railways, who had invited senators, MPs, and journalists aboard the federal steamers. The *Earl Grey*, detached from the Navy fleet, hosted members of the Cabinet and their guests. MPs relaxed aboard the *Rapids King* of the *Canada Steamship Line*. The *Lady Evelyn* also carried senior civil servants from Québec, while the *Plessis* was crowded with the proud citizens of the capital.

These large ships, where only English was spoken, were surrounded by a swarm of smaller boats —motorboats, rowboats, and sailboats— where French voices rang out. Among the most attentive spectators were two hundred members of the *Canadian Society of Civil Engineers* and their American counterparts, in town for their annual convention, joined by prominent figures in bridge engineering.

Absent, of course, was Theodore Cooper, who remained in New York, awaiting the reports in the next day's newspapers. Also present were several *"honorable*" members of the Australian Parliament, recently returned from a *trench side tour* of the French front — though they had not lingered long enough to fight. Their official trip had conveniently turned into a sightseeing tour of England and Canada.

From time to time, when boats drifted too near, Captain Murray's spokesman would bark orders in English for them to move away. Replies came back in French — some of which, it was probably better he did not understand.

At exactly 8 a.m., the central parabolic span was positioned beneath the cantilevers and held stationary while workers attached the four hoisting jacks — one at each corner. The mist had lifted. Thousands of breathless spectators watched in silence. Then, one tug let out a shrill blast. The barges slowly pulled away, leaving the span suspended above the gleaming river. At once, whistles and sirens erupted from every vessel, answering the delirious cheers of the crowd in a triumphant symphony. Thousands of hands clapped. Thousands of voices rang out in unison. The noise grew deafening — an exultant chaos.

The arch seemed to float, delicate and ethereal, its steel cables as thin as a spider's silk. The span rested on a platform suspended from eight jacks —two at each corner— activated by hydraulic pumps pressurized to 1,800 kilograms each, powered by a massive compressor stationed at Saint-Romuald. The jacks creaked and hissed as the great mass slowly, almost imperceptibly, began to rise.

After two hours of excruciatingly slow progress, many spectators —both on land and at sea— began to leave, confident the rest was merely technical. By then, the span hung just 2.2 meters from its final position. The transcontinental link was nearly complete. Few lingered for the final bolting.

But the saga of the Quebec Bridge was not yet finished.

Although vilified by the Royal Commission, and cast into retirement in disgrace, fate seemed determined to grant the American Theodore Cooper a final, ironic consolation.

Those who had left early would soon bitterly regret their haste. As the span approached its final height, the remaining spectators saw it suddenly sway —side to side— before toppling and vanishing into the river in a matter of seconds. The St. Lawrence River swallowed the mountain of steel without splash or tremor, like a magician performing a trick, like a chameleon flicking its tongue. Those who looked away at that instant saw nothing. A collective gasp swept the crowd.

The cantilevers shuddered violently. The vibration turned into a ghastly moan — a thousand steel drums, a long mechanical howl. Foremen screamed to workers to remain at their posts. Panic

rose : many feared the entire bridge was about to follow the span into the river. Again.

Most engineers, confident the hardest part was over, had already left the bridge. One, Andrew Johnson, was at a bank, preparing to declare the operation a success, when a tremendous crack, followed by a thunderclap, told him all had not gone as planned.

Some men manning the jacks jumped into the river, fearing collapse —though such an act risked death by falling beams. Bob Kramer, foreman of the ironworkers, had called in sick. He was replaced by a French-speaking worker, Archie Cadorette, who also leapt— but survived.

When the trembling ceased, a strange joy overtook many. The bridge had held. It had not collapsed.

Dazed spectators murmured:

—I turned for a moment—and the span had vanished. It fell with a sharp metallic crack. It twisted in the middle, rolled sideways, and crumpled. It roared—like a train derailing. If the cantilevers had gone too, 150 men would have died.

One witness said he had just remarked to an engineer that the subcontracting had been a great Canadian triumph, when someone screamed : "*The bridge is falling !*" He turned to see the lattice of steel curl and vanish with a terrible crash.

Another, just 30 metres away, said:

—There was no splash. No wave. The steel mesh let the water pass through. It took seven seconds. A southern beam buckled — and

the whole thing dropped. The men fell like lumps of coal off a delivery truck. I saw a group standing on the cantilever anchor struck by flying debris. Some were rescued. Others were dragged from the river by the small boats rushing to the scene.

Mrs. Odell, a woman from Montreal who witnessed the tragedy, reported seeing the parabolic span collapse onto a small boat passing beneath it, carrying curious onlookers. It is possible — but the authorities showed no concern. These unfortunate souls joined the many who had already drowned during the first collapse in 1907.

Accounts of the disaster varied widely. Yet, by way of compromise, it seems that the lower beams of the central span were the first to twist. The platform held for a few seconds longer, but the large wooden wedges meant to stabilize the parabolic arch were likely dislodged by the warping of the metal. Thrown into the river by the very arch they were meant to support, they triggered a violent recoil. This sudden shift caused the entire platform to crash into the water.

A great cry of anguish rose from the crowd. Women screamed. Men stood frozen, stunned. Bridge workers struggled to hold back tears. “It was as if they had lost a great friend,” wrote a local journalist.

Navy Minister J. D. Hazen, watching from the *Lady Evelyn*, had a front-row seat to the catastrophe. He described the beams beginning to twist and rivets exploding “like popcorn in a pan.” Colonel W. M. McBain of Ottawa, who was preparing to pass under the bridge just 100 yards away, said, “The supports of the central span began to crack, one after another.” He described a group

of workers inside a cage suspended from the end of the cantilever, secured by a rope tied to the central span to minimize swaying. When the span plunged into the river, the rope snapped—mercifully. The cage remained suspended thirty meters above the water, swinging violently, while the men inside were hurled against the protective grilles with terrifying force.

Armand Ardin, an eighteen-year-old resident of Saint-Romuald, saw a worker fall into the river, thrashing like a devil in a stoup. Ardin dove in without hesitation and managed to pull the man back to shore.

Three men working on the central span survived: Jack Wilson, Peter Jackson, and Pierre Barbeau.

News of the disaster spread like wildfire across the city, the province, and the country. "*The sadness was written on every face*," reported one journalist. People mourned not only for the victims but also for the loss of hope : as another reporter put it, "*there was a sense that the civil engineers — and the city of Quebec — would once again be deprived of their bridge.*" The goal had been so close, which made the setback all the more bitter.

More than a hundred men had been working on the bridge that day, many accompanied by wives and children who had come in boats to witness the triumph of engineering. Fourteen men had been stationed on the central span at the moment of collapse. Six bodies were recovered; eight were lost. Tugboats and motorboats scoured the waters in vain, seeking survivors in the cruel sunlight that now illuminated tragedy with pitiless clarity.

The contracts between the governments and the bridge's construction Companies were so intricate that no one initially

knew who was financially liable. Everything seemed calculated to diffuse responsibility. The central span was a total loss, though the rest of the structure remained intact. Philip Johnson, president of the St. Lawrence Bridge Company, stated : "*The bridge certainly cannot be left as it is. Of course, I cannot speak immediately to what measures will be necessary to complete the center section*."

He refused to speculate on the cause of the collapse, saying only, "*The lifting system is still intact. It's difficult to know whether the span slipped from its supports or if the girders themselves failed*."

Maritime traffic in the area was suspended. Engineers consulted on the matter claimed that recovering the central span from the St. Lawrence would be impossible. "*It will not hinder navigation,* one said, *since the depth of the water here is fifty-four meters, and the span only thirty-three. She must be lying on her side, which would reduce the effective height to about twenty-six meters. In any case, vessels will pass above her, unless some of the girders remain upright*." The most severe consequence, they agreed, would be the loss of time.

Rumors of a curse attached to the bridge began to circulate — whispers that would later echo those surrounding *Tutankhamun's tomb.* Some claimed that Theodore Cooper was the devil himself, sent to torment Canadians. One tale said that after the first collapse, a pact had been struck: the new chief engineer could succeed, on the condition that he sacrifice the soul of the first person to cross the bridge. He accepted. But on inauguration day, rather than send a human, he sent a large black cat onto the deck — a substitute the devil was forced to accept. The common people's credulity, it seemed, knew no bounds.

A gentler legend spoke of a single gold rivet, secretly inserted into the superstructure by an eccentric and wealthy worker. The challenge, now, would be to find it — but beware ! For, should anyone remove it, the bridge might collapse once more. And as they say… things always come in threes.

The second official inauguration took place on September 20, 1917, a full year after the second accident. By then, the central span had been bolted into place with the utmost caution. The ceremony was subdued — nearly secretive. Tension hung in the air. At the slightest tremor, panic threatened. This time, officials kept their distance. Everyone knew that beneath those shimmering waters rested the souls of most of the eighty-nine men who had drowned during the first collapse in 1907.

A more formal — though largely symbolic — inauguration was held on August 22, 1919. By then, the bridge had already been in service for some time. The ceremony was presided over by the twenty-five-year-old Prince of Wales — the same man who, under the name Edward VIII, would briefly become King of England in 1936, only to abdicate months later because he befriended Adolf Hitler, officially to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson, a twice-divorced American.

Following these disasters, the Iroquois of Montreal refused to work together on the same site again, having lost 35 members of their reserve in a single incident. Meanwhile, a faculty at one of Montréal's engineering schools now holds part of its convocation in a room whose walls are adorned with a massive chain recovered from the wreckage — a solemn reminder that engineering errors can carry the gravest consequences.

Perhaps the only lasting benefit of the Quebec Bridge disaster was that it marked the end of the race toward ever-larger cantilever bridges. No engineer since has dared to outdo the Quebec Bridge. And for that reason, it still bears the title : *the longest cantilever bridge in the world*.

The First Crime of St. Louis-des-Illinois

One evening, leaning against the window of a hotel, I listened to the vast city of St. Louis, Missouri, as it seemed to breathe and pulse with life. Two and a half million souls were packed into its sprawl. The sirens of police vehicles occasionally slashed through the night's murmur — a mixture of car engines and the shouts of late-night wanderers. These passersby, Black, White, and Hispanic, drifted along the grimy sidewalks of downtown, some of them with an unsteady gait.

I couldn't help but recall the very first crime—almost two centuries earlier—when the city still spoke French and was but a shadow of the metropolis it would become. As luck would have it, I had stumbled upon the account just a few days before, buried in a dusty old volume. I share it now for your curious mind.

Founded in 1764 by Auguste Chouteau as a fur trading post, the city of *Saint-Louis-des-Illinois* came under Spanish control in 1770, only to be returned later to France, and eventually ceded as part of the Louisiana Purchase. In 1878, Charles Gibson wrote:

"In 1818, the city had about two thousand inhabitants, two-thirds of whom were French and one-third American. The language spoken among Whites in the streets was still French. Everyone spoke French — to the Black servants, to the horses, to the dogs, and even when driving their oxen."

No event in the criminal history of St. Louis had ever caused such profound shock in the community as *"the Montesquiou-Fezensac crime"*, or *"the tragedy of the Hôtel de la Cité,"* as it came to be known.

On Sunday, October 28, 1848, two young French noblemen—Gonsalve and Raymond de Montesquiou-Fezensac[1]—were staying at the *Hôtel de la Cité*, owned by a man named Barnum. They had arrived in the United States that June, eager to discover the charms and marvels of the New World, moving slowly westward. Their previous stop had been Chicago.

Alfred de Montesquiou-Fezensac, father of the boys, Gonsalve and Raymond.

Gonsalve was about twenty-eight, Raymond two years his junior. They carried with them not only a substantial amount of money, but also an impressive wardrobe, an array of weapons, and full hunting gear.

Their room opened onto a hallway leading to a small inner courtyard. Directly across, in a ground-floor apartment also facing the yard, lived Albert Jones, H. M. Henderson, and Captain William Hubbell. In another room overlooking the same courtyard resided T. Kirby Barnum, the hotel owner's nephew, along with the butler, Mr. Macomber.

[1] Gonzalve de Montesquiou-Fézensac, born in Paris on 25 January 1822, died in Ivry-sur-Seine on 11 March 1893. He was unmarried. Raymond de Montesquiou-Fézensac, born at the Château de Villebon on 20 August 1827, died in Nanterre on 11 October 1905.

Between eleven and midnight, on the night of October 28 to 29, as young Barnum and Macomber were preparing for bed, they were startled by a tap on the window. Since the curtains had not been drawn, they could clearly see the two young Frenchmen in the courtyard. One of them held a pistol.

Raymond de Montesquiou-Fezensac, older. (Priv. Coll.)

Without warning, the Frenchman fired. Barnum was mortally wounded, and Macomber was shot in the wrist.

Hearing the shots, Jones, Henderson, and Hubbell opened the door to their room — only to find themselves in the line of fire. Jones was killed instantly; the others were lightly wounded. The two brothers retreated to their room, where they were soon arrested.

At first, the murders were shrouded in mystery. The Montesquiou brothers were perfectly sober and had had no interaction with any of the victims. During his arrest, Raymond stated that Gonsalve had recently shown signs of mental illness. Gonsalve, for his part, took responsibility, claiming he had been seized by an uncontrollable urge "*to kill two men*." He insisted that Raymond had followed him in an effort to prevent the tragedy, but that it had all happened too quickly for him to intervene.

"*Albert Jones, one of Gonsalve Montesquiou's victims*," wrote a witness named Sturgeon, "*was a close friend and client of mine. I worked in the timber trade; he manufactured trolleys. Jones*,

like Kirby Barnum—also killed by Gonsalve—was an esteemed and widely liked young man. Their senseless murder provoked immense public sympathy and deep outrage against the killers."

"*Before they could be taken into custody, Gonsalve and Raymond were reportedly kicked, slapped, and badly treated by bystanders*."

"*The next day, I was relieved to learn that the act had been committed by a madman. I felt great compassion for poor Raymond, who had suddenly found himself caught in his brother's madness and very nearly lost his own life. I asked myself what I could do to help these unfortunate men, and to save my city from the shame that would come if, in the heat of passion, a mob executed a madman — and with him, an innocent man*."

"*What must it have felt like for Raymond*, I thought, *to be stranded in a foreign land, so far from home, with no one to stand by him ? The fact that they were nobles only inflamed local prejudice. The crowd was so furious that it could scarcely be restrained from exacting vengeance before the funerals of Barnum and Jones had even taken place*."

"*I attended the funeral of my friend Jones. As I was leaving the cemetery with three others in a carriage, one of them confided to me that a plan was underway to storm the jail that very night, to seize the prisoners and hang them. I listened without saying a word, but I resolved to act. I considered jumping from the carriage on some pretense and returning to town to hide the Montesquiou brothers. But I feared this might raise suspicion. So I continued on, determined to return in time to save Raymond and his mad brother*."

"*I rushed to the courthouse and was fortunate to find my friend Louis Labeaume, known as 'Tit'Labeaume,' then sheriff of the county. I confided everything to him*."

Thanks to Sheriff Labeaume and Mr. Sturgeon, the lynching was averted. A terrible injustice had been narrowly avoided.

Later, Gonsalve would claim that God Himself had commanded him to kill. There were two trials. The first lasted four weeks and ended in dismissal. The second ended in a hung jury after forty hours of deliberation.

A few weeks later, the governor ordered the release of both brothers — Gonsalve for reason of insanity, Raymond on the grounds that :

"*it was the general belief that he had not participated in the crimes for which he was accused, and that further prosecution would serve no purpose of public Justice, but would merely incur greater expense and further distress*."

The brothers departed immediately for New York, and from there, boarded a ship bound for France.

Gonsalve de Montesquiou-Fezensac died soon after, consumed by violent madness.

Coat of Arms of the family Montesquiou Fezensac. The famous d'Artagnan, who inspired *The Three Musketeers* novel, was their first cousin. Though not a Montesquiou, he took his name from his mother, Françoise de Montesquiou d'Artagnan, because it was more famous in court.

The Crimes of Jacques Mesrine in Canada

There are immigrants a country would gladly do without. On a gloomy day in 1969, Canada unwittingly welcomed two such individuals —tourists in name only— who would soon abandon legality to prey upon the hard-working citizens around them. Jacques Mesrine, thirty-five, a self-described architect and model maker, and Jeanne Schneider, thirty-one, a nurse, arrived on a simple tourist visa. Their presence would soon bring grief and turmoil to several Canadian families.

As Mesrine began his spree in Canada, Charles Manson was making headlines in the United States with the murder of Sharon Tate, Roman Polanski's pregnant wife. Both men —Mesrine and Manson— would soon find themselves before the assize courts. Meanwhile, in Switzerland, the last Western country to do so, finally granted women *the right to vote*. In Canada, lawyers were lobbying for the adoption of the *Charter of Human Rights* into the Constitution — legislation that would later serve to enrich many of them through endless lawsuits, often as frivolous as they were lucrative.

Judges appointed more for their political connections than their jurisprudence — would now dictate their interpretations to legislators actually elected by the people.

Jeanne Schneider

In canada, Jacques Mesrine sequestered a crippled rich man, Georges Deslauriers in an apartment in Sherbrooke, rented —incredible as it may seem— under his real name, and demanded a solid ransom of $200,000 from his brother. During the negotiations,

Mesrine made a second mistake, that of leaving the disabled man in a wheelchair alone in the apartment, unsupervised, to collect the ransom. But, for some reason, the victim's brother did not come to.

But let us go back to the beginning of this sordid adventure. At first, no one suspected anything unusual. Here is the accurate and natural translation : A French couple wants to find work with a disabled Québécois billionaire; what could be more ordinary ?

A disabled man on an electric scooter, alone and vulnerable, made the perfect target. The two *faux* tourists were quickly hired —he as a cook, she as a domestic aide. For over a month, they observed the household in silence. Their employer, Georges Deslauriers, began to congratulate himself on having found reliable help. But then Jeanne Schneider had a heated argument with the gardener, and Deslauriers, growing wary, dismissed them both.

During that first month, however, Mesrine had cultivated ties with members of Montreal's criminal underworld. It didn't take long to recruit another thug —Michel Dupont— who joined him and Schneider in kidnapping Deslauriers, on June 20, 1969.

They held Deslauriers in a Sherbrooke apartment —rented, incredibly, under Mesrine's real name— and demanded $200,000 from Deslauriers' brother. Then Mesrine made a fatal mistake : he

left his victim unattended in a wheelchair while going to collect the ransom. The brother never showed up, and when the criminals returned, the apartment was empty ; their golden goose had flown away. In a panic, the kidnappers fled east, hoping to find a Norwegian fishing boat that could take them back to Europe. They ended up in Percé, a sleepy provincial town with no such shipping line. They rented Unit 4 at the *Auberge des Trois Sœurs* for four days.

For the Deslauriers's kidnapping, their high-profile lawyer, Raymond Daoust —Montreal's most expensive, $1,000 a day— had advised them to plead guilty. The result : eleven years for Mesrine, five for Schneider. The misogynistic juges, as usual, considered women less culpable. In the end, it was a blessing. An informal deal meant Mesrine would serve just two and a half years, and Schneider only eighteen months, before being deported, expelled from Canada.

During their stay in Percé, they befriended the innkeeper, Evelyne Le Bouthillier, lulling her into trust. After kidnapping a disabled man, Mesrine and Schneider were now plotting to rob — and murder— an elderly woman for a handful of jewelry. The Canadian bandit, Michel Dupont, sensing where all this was heading, returned to Montreal. He likely realized that these accomplices would only drag him down. His instincts were sound. A few days later, Mesrine and Schneider would leave town, only to return discreetly and kill Evelyne Le Bouthillier.

Back in Montreal, Dupont was easily caught when he visited his sister — whose apartment had been turned into a trap by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He promptly confessed, providing details that implicated Mesrine and Schneider. Investigators learned that the pair of jailbirds, realizing they couldn't escape from the Gaspé Peninsula, had pivoted toward Texas — but

not before returning to Percé to eliminate their trusting hostess and get some money.

On July 7, they rented a motorboat from Windsor's *Lyle Blondie Marina* and crossed into Detroit, bypassing customs and immigration services. The boat was abandoned, as was their custom. On July 8, they rented another car —this time from the Detroit Hertz office— and drove to Cape Kennedy (Florida) to witness the launch of an Apollo capsule. Their escape ended in Texarkana, Arkansas, on July 16, when they were apprehended by the *Federal Bureau of Investigation*. Knowing full well that American prisons were no place for amateurs —and fearing sexual assault by the hulking inmates who filled them— Mesrine and Schneider agreed to extradition.

They were returned to Saint-Hyacinthe (Canada) to stand trial for the kidnapping. But the RCMP transferred them to the newly renovated prison in Percé, deemed "*escape-proof*" by the locals.

But what the Gaspesians deemed inviolable was a mere playground to a gallows-bound outlaw like Mesrine. On September 11, he fashioned a knife from an aluminum fork, took a guard hostage, and forced him to hand over the keys. Jeanne, in the women's wing, did the same. In no time, the pair strolled out the front door — headed not for open fields but for the thick forests of the Chic-Choc Mountains in the Canadian Appalachians. And that was their undoing.

Unfamiliar with the wilderness of eastern Québec, they soon became lost and exhausted. Ironically, their salvation came in the form of an RCMP helicopter. They were promptly returned to

Québec City's civil prison, receiving an additional year for their escape attempt.

But justice wasn't done — not yet. Investigators examining a crime committed in Percé days after the couple's departure linked them to the murder of Evelyne Le Bouthillier. After shipping three large suitcases to Dallas, Mesrine and Schneider traveled to Windsor, Ontario, where Mesrine rented a car from Hertz. The car was later abandoned outside a hotel, as confirmed by leasing agent Jeffrey Williams.

Evelyne Le Bouthillier.

Recaptured, Mesrine and Schneider's trial for murdering Evelyn Le bouthillier was to begin in Percé, but given local outrage, the Defense requested a change of venue. The trial was moved to Montmagny, a tranquil town nestled at the foot of the Monts Notre-Dame, part of the same Appalachian range.

The charge : murdering seventy-year-old Evelyne Le Bouthillier by suffocation after lulling her into trust. Their stay at the inn had lasted from June 21 to 25. They left, returned covertly, and committed the crime.

The evidence was damning. A fingerprint from Mesrine was found on a glass; Schneider's, beneath a wooden ashtray. The victim's body was discovered on June 30. Unless Daoust could pull off a miracle, the couple faced life in prison — or worse.

The bandit's last journey. (Priv. Coll.)

When arrested in Texas, Mesrine and Schneider had watches, jewelry, and an alarm clock in their possession. Mesrine claimed they were his, brought from France. The courtroom erupted in laughter. Even the judge quipped :

—*I hope you'll find a better explanation during your trial.*

Mesrine erupted in fury, hurling insults. He was forcibly removed from the courtroom.

To support his story, he told Daoust he had photographs from France showing Schneider wearing the jewelry. He even named the Paris shop where he claimed to have bought them. A rogatory commission —composed of Judge Paul Miquelon, prosecutor Anatole Corriveau, Lieutenant Georges Caron, and Me. Daoust— was dispatched to France to question witnesses.

But Daoust was no ordinary lawyer. He could have won a case for Beelzebub before a jury of bishops. He was a master of sowing doubt and confusing clarity. Proudly, he declared, "*Ninety-eight murder trials without a single failure*"—and he was not about to make Mesrine the first.

Fate intervened again. During the proceedings, prosecutor Corriveau suffered a heart attack and collapsed in the courtroom. Mesrine laughed diabolically, revealing his true character. The trial was halted.

It resumed on 18 January 1971, in Montmagny, presided over by Justice Paul Miquelon. The defense included Me. Daoust and local lawyer Me. Yvon Mercier —though Daoust overshadowed him in the press. Crown prosecutors Maurice Lagacé and Bertrand Laforest rounded out the cast of what now resembled a courtroom farce.

From the outset, Mesrine admitted to past crimes : an 18-month sentence in France in 1962 for illegal weapons possession as a former OAS commando, another for stealing documents from a Nazi officer, and yet another suspended sentence under a Franco-Spanish agreement for stealing political papers from a governor in the Balearic Islands. The rest, as they say, was theatre.

The next day, the atmosphere in court was tense. There was talk of having the accused undergo a lie detector test, but the judge, aware of the unreliability of such devices, refused. Mesrine immediately saw the advantage he could draw from this refusal in his ongoing manipulation of the jury. Feigning outrage, he shouted:

—*It's absolutely illegal !*

Eager to add her own contribution to the commotion, Jeanne Schneider leapt to her feet like a devil, screaming:

—*Your Honour, I want to be tested too !*

Sylvia Jeanjacquot, blinded in one eye during Mesrine's final shootout.

—*Sit down !* barked Judge Miquelon.

—*I'm innocent and I want to take the test !*

—*I want it too,* bellowed Mesrine. *Witnesses protect themselves with the Bible. I want to protect myself with the lie detector. You're hiding the truth. I want to be tested because I speak the truth. But you're hiding it – the truth !*

Beside himself with rage, the judge thundered :

—*I apply section 557 of the Criminal Code. I expel this accused. That's all !*

—*I'm the same,* Schneider interjected.

—*Do you want to leave ?*

—*Yes, because I'm innocent !*

—*Then get out !*

"With pleasure."

The jurors sat speechless, unaware of the psychological impact these Machiavellian maneuvers had upon them. The spectators felt as though they were witnessing a battle between a

schoolteacher from the nearby Louis-Jacques-Casault Secondary School and a gang of rebellious, insolent students.

The defence lawyers —who may well have scripted this uproar— looked on silently, evidently satisfied, knowing it would greatly influence the jurors when they deliberated, and might also sway the *Court of Appeal* if the case rose to higher courts. These good rural folk would surely imagine that only innocent people would demand such a "*test of truth*". It was a clever calculation.

Later that day, Me. Daoust employed another tactic to undermine a witness. He called Lucille Alain, the young waitress who had served the two criminals a light meal at around 4 a.m. on the night of the murder. Through deft questioning, he led her to declare that on the night of June 29–30, Mesrine was wearing a moustache —a detail he wanted planted firmly in the jurors' minds. He then called the next witness, Pierre Migault, a Montreal barber, who testified that he had shaved off Mesrine's moustache on June 26, days before the murder. The jurors were visibly shaken.

When it came to proving that the stolen jewellery had not come from Evelyne Le Bouthillier's ransacked drawers, two witnesses were heard via audio recording. The first was Bernard Fried, a costume jewellery manufacturer in Paris and a friend of the Mesrine family, who claimed to recognise several of the necklaces. The second was Mesrine's father, Pierre, who ran a clothing workshop in Paris and who gave his customers jewellery purchased from Fried each year on St. Catherine's Day. As for the cufflinks, Mesrine senior had, of course, recognised them as belonging to his dear son.

During questioning, his father tried to remain as vague as possible, frequently using the word "truc" or "machin" to answer

questions without saying anything explicit. Among the audience —including the author of these lines— many saw in the father's false testimonies the source of the son's dishonesty.

Thanks to his seasoned lawyers, that day proved particularly fruitful for the murderer. The two scoundrels rubbed their hands in satisfaction.

Because Me. Daoust represented the defence, he had to plead first; such is the law, to ensure the Crown Prosecutor leaves the final impression upon the jurors. Thus, Daoust had to anticipate the blows of the prosecution's closing argument, as he would have no right of reply.

Addressing the jury, he declared :

"*If the Crown wanted to prove the guilt of the accused, it has failed. The law makes you the sole judges of the facts. This entire case rests upon circumstantial evidence. The law is clear: such evidence must be so consistent with the accused's guilt that no reasonable doubt remains. Otherwise, you must deliver a verdict of acquittal*."

"This prosecution is based on two things: fingerprints and jewellery. There are no eyewitnesses to Ms. Le Bouthillier's murder, and no one saw the accused at the scene at the time of the crime. The Crown presented two fingerprints as proof: Mesrine's on a glass and Schneider's under an ashtray. The defence does not dispute their authenticity. Our own expert confirmed it. We fight honestly and reasonably. The key question is: WHEN were these fingerprints left? That is what you must decide. The police expert said they were fresh, less than twenty-four hours old. But our expert, Mr. Armand Morin, a leading authority, showed you through

experiments that there is no difference between a fingerprint that is twenty-four hours old, five days old, ten days old, or fifteen days old. This is irrefutable."

"*Another oddity. The Crown claims there was someone in the house during the murder: Miss Irène Le Bouthillier. So the killer knew there was a witness. Does it make sense that he would commit murder under such conditions ?*"

"*The Crown suggests the accused wore gloves in the bedroom and wiped away all traces, yet left fingerprints in the living room. That is absurd*."

"*Then, after the murder, they supposedly went to a restaurant at 4 a.m. and stayed for over forty-five minutes. The waitress said Mesrine had a moustache, though he'd shaved it days earlier*."

"*As for the jewellery, Mesrine identified them precisely. He described details only the owner would know. The cufflinks too – he told you where he got them, and we even found the box at his home.*"

"*Fingerprints mean nothing if you can't prove when they were left. The jewellery is far more likely his than the victim's. What more do you need? Would you convict your own son or brother with such evidence? Would you send him to prison for life ?*

It was an irresistible argument, appealing directly to the jurors' hearts rather than their reason – but powerful nonetheless.

For four long hours, Me. Daoust delivered his masterful plea, until he was utterly spent.

The next morning, Crown Prosecutor Mr. Lagacé began his closing argument :

"*We have circumstantial evidence that holds. We found the victim's jewellery in the accused's suitcases and their fingerprints at the crime scene. He called Irène Le Bouthillier, they were seen at Pic de l'Aurore shortly before the murder, and they ate in Carleton hours later… He identified Miss Le Bouthillier as easy prey…*"

It was a critical moment. Daoust could say no more to influence the jury. So Mesrine intervened from the defendants' box, laughing loudly. Furious, Judge Miquelon snapped:

—*Mesrine, stop laughing !*

—*Aren't you laughing yourself ?*

—*Stop this nonsense !*

—*I want to be excluded from court.*

—*No !*

—*I ask to leave because it's disgusting to hear such things. When I hear a madman speak like that…*

—When your lawyer pleaded, no one interrupted him…

—That's because he was telling the truth! This is a soap opera !

Finally, Mesrine fell silent. He had broken the prosecutor's oratorical effect – his goal. Mr. Lagacé resumed :

"*Family members identified no less than fourteen items. Is it possible they were wrong fourteen times ? Is it possible Mesrine did not even know the name of the victim he murdered ? Is it possible the three police officers were mistaken ? No. Mesrine thought he was smarter than the police. It backfired. I ask you to judge this matter sensibly. Choose between the Crown's disinterested witnesses and Mesrine's lies.*

Judge Miquelon then explained the principle of reasonable doubt to the jury:

"*You must decide whether Mesrine was in Percé on June 29. For that, you must choose between his testimony and that of the three Pic de l'Aurore employees. You must also choose between his word and the waitress in Carleton. Do you think ALL these witnesses lied to you?*"

On Saturday morning, the twelve jurors deliberated for an hour and a half. After thirty minutes, they returned to have parts of the testimony reread, then resumed their closed discussions. The tension was extreme.

When deliberations ended, Mesrine and Schneider were brought back to court, unhandcuffed. As they entered, a policeman shoved Schneider. Mesrine lunged at the officer, knocking him unconscious with an uppercut to the chin before being subdued and handcuffed by others.

Finally, the verdict fell like a guillotine's blade upon the neck of justice itself : NOT GUILTY.

When the acquittal was announced, a murmur of incredulous protest rippled through the audience. Judge Miquelon, clearly disappointed, said:

"Gentlemen of the jury, thank you. The Court is obliged to accept the verdict. I say 'obliged' because it is not the verdict I would have given."

Turning to Mesrine and Schneider, he added:

—You are cleared of this charge. I hope you can sleep in peace with your conscience. You will now return to where you came from – Saint-Vincent-de-Paul prison – to finish serving your other sentences. In the meantime, I suggest you pray for Miss Le Bouthillier's forgiveness."

—*If she were here,* Jeanne Schneider cried out joyfully, she would tell you we are innocent."

—*We are innocent!"* shouted Mesrine.

—*Take them away*, said the judge, exasperated.

A dozen police officers seized the couple to escort them out. After they were gone, Judge Miquelon addressed the jurors:

—*Gentlemen, my remarks are not a reprimand. I hope you judged honestly, according to your conscience. But I must tell you, I do not share your opinion. Excuse me, and thank you.*

He then revealed that Mesrine was serving a ten-year sentence for kidnapping a disabled man, and Schneider a five-year

sentence for the same crime – information it would have been illegal to share before the verdict.

On Monday, February 8, 1971, newspapers across Canada expressed shock. The acquittal seemed as incredible as O.J. Simpson's would be years later in the United States.

After the Montmagny trial, Mesrine was transferred to Archambault prison, a maximum-security facility considered the most secure in Canada. Built only four years earlier, it housed the country's most dangerous criminals : sixty-two murderers guarded by sixty-five staff. It was said Archambault was the only prison where reading was the sole means of escape.

But on August 21, 1972, that myth collapsed. That day, Jacques Mesrine, then thirty-seven, escaped alongside a band not of poets but of hardened criminals: Jean-Paul Mercier, twenty-eight; Robert Imbeault, twenty-three; André Ouellette, thirty-three; Pierre Vincent, twenty-seven (quickly recaptured); and Michel Lafleur, twenty-two. Ouellette and Lafleur were political prisoners and members of the FLQ.

Le gangster Jean-Paul Mercier.

There were twenty-three inmates in the courtyard during the morning walk at the north end of the complex. They were required to remain outside from 9:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. At 9:30, the guard in the watchtower noticed unusual movements in the bushes near the fence and sounded the alarm. Using wire cutters, the fugitives had cut a passage through the two wire fences. The prisoners in the yard were immediately ordered back to their quarters. When

the count was done, six were found missing from this institution, which bore the proud title of "*maximum security penitentiary*."

Solicitor General Jean-Pierre Goyer climbed up into one of the prison's watchtowers to observe the escape point. From that vantage, he angrily declared that he could clearly see where the prisoners had fled and that the whole scene had taken place under the eyes of the guards. Why, he thundered, had they not opened fire when they saw the men moving in the bushes?

"It's high time we take a serious look at what these people are doing inside our correctional facilities instead of endlessly buying more security gadgets. I'm fed up !" he shouted, peppering his outburst with words that protocol forbids me to repeat here.

All bridges leading to Île Jésus were placed under surveillance. *Police Municipale de Laval* joined the *Sûreté du Québec* and prison guards to comb the surrounding woods for the fugitives throughout the day.

In the aftermath of the escape, Archambault Prison was closed for a year to assess the situation, and the inmates were transferred back to the old penitentiary.

On Wednesday, August 23, 1972, columnist Laurent Laplante wrote in *Le Devoir*:

"Unfortunately, many of our prisons, including some of the newest, were designed by architects whose only contact with crime has been through their political connections."

These scathing words demonstrated the great freedom of expression enjoyed in Canada — perhaps more than they revealed

any criminal tendencies among our politicians, who are no more brigands (nor less so, for that matter) than those of any other country.

But Mesrine remained at large. On September 10, 1972, he cold-bloodedly shot dead two fathers, Médéric Côté and Ernest Saint-Pierre, forest rangers in Saint-Louis-de-Blandford, near Victoriaville. Then he disappeared into the vast boreal forests of southern Québec, eventually crossing into the United States, where he managed to evade the FBI's traps. Passing through Mexico and Venezuela, he finally returned illegally to France, where he was immediately arrested in March 1973 at Boulogne-Billancourt by gendarmes who had been watching him.

—*Congratulations,* said Mesrine. *You succeeded where the FBI failed.*

But in June 1973, he escaped from the Compiègne courthouse by taking the judge hostage. He had asked to go to the restroom, where an accomplice had hidden a pistol. With the gun pressed to the judge's head, Mesrine left the building unopposed. However, in September 1973, he fell into a trap laid by Commissioner Broussard's anti-gang unit and was arrested while hiding in Paris.

In May 1977, Mesrine was sentenced to twenty years in prison. A year later, he pulled off a spectacular coup by escaping from the high-security wing of La Santé prison in Paris with his friends François Besse and Carman Rives. But a shootout ensued, and Rives was killed. His lawyer, Christiane Giletti, was arrested and charged with "supplying instruments and weapons to facilitate an escape."

On May 16, 1978, a week after his escape, Mesrine taunted the authorities by appearing at the Deauville police station before robbing the city's casino. At the station, he presented a fake police inspector's card and asked to speak with the duty officer, who was absent.

—*I'll come back!"* Mesrine proclaimed as he left.

Moments later, accompanied by another gangster, he went to the casino. When the doorman asked for identification, he flashed his police card and demanded to see Mr. Marsin, the gaming director.

—*I'm looking for a crook*, he explained. *Then, revealing his true identity, he proudly shouted to the group he now held at gunpoint:*

—*I'm Mesrine. Surely you've heard of me.*

At the end of this unorthodox introduction, he fled with the 80,000 francs handed over by the terrified cashier. But an employee had triggered a silent alarm, and the two bandits were met at the door by four policemen. A shootout erupted; both gangsters brandished two revolvers each. Two women —a Frenchwoman and an Englishwoman— were wounded by stray bullets.

The tabloid press and left-wing newspapers, eager to destabilize the government, reported extensively on Mesrine's exploits, often portraying him positively fearing his reprisals. This unexpected glorification led some to see him as a kind of heroic "wall-breaker," forgetting that he had murdered numerous people, including an elderly Canadian woman. For a long time, France had been the stage for a concerted effort to tarnish the image of law

enforcement in the public's eyes, through left-wing literature, cinema, and the press.

In June 1978, Mesrine took a hostage in a branch of Société Générale and walked away with a large sum of money. The following month, while still on the run, he gave a flattering interview to *Paris Match* journalist Isabelle de Wangen. De Wangen, outrageously fascinated by the murderer's raw virility, was later charged with harboring a criminal and complicity in glorifying crime. In November that year, Mesrine attempted another hostage-taking, this time at the home of Judge Petit, president of the Paris Assize Court, but the plan failed.

Shortly afterwards, he sent two open letters to *Libération* and *Le Matin*. In them, he called on *Commissioner Devos*, head of the *Anti-Banditry Brigade*, to defend not underpaid workers, but prisoners held in high-security units. Mesrine was trying to forge a Robin Hood legend as a hero of the oppressed, but fate would soon end his charade. He was living his last days.

In the weekly *Minute*, one could read:

"*To understand Mesrine, it is important to discard worn-out clichés about the 'gangster with a big heart,' the 'rough but fair' man, the 'regular guy' who respects his friends. Mesrine respects no rules. Some of his friends, after sharing lobsters and rabbit stew he cooked himself in his London hideout, later felt completely discarded. They know Mesrine wouldn't hesitate to double-cross an accomplice, as he did in the Lelièvre Crime Case, or betray collaborators as he did with Judge Petit. They know that once the 600 million were pocketed, Mesrine could easily vanish forever, just as he always promised*."

In January 1979, Mesrine wrote in *Libération*:

"*I am still armed because I have no gifts to give, and there won't be any if the police catch me… I will never agree to return to the high-security blocks. I have no intention of letting myself be taken alive*."

To emphasize his parasitic lifestyle, he added :

"*I spend my days watching television, making love, sleeping, and eating… I don't move, I just wait…*"

Then came the fatal day. A week later, the Montreal magazine *Photo-Police* would headline : "**MESRINE SHOT LIKE A DOG**." Police, who for so long had been obliged to scrupulously follow the law and often seemed clumsy and powerless, finally used the same weapons as him, and Mesrine lost his advantage.

He was at the wheel of a grey BMW with his Canadian mistress of the moment. The French police had been tracking him for days. Mesrine had publicly vowed he would fight to the death rather than return to prison. At the request of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Commissaire Robert Broussard and Commissaire Serge Devos had decided not to take unnecessary risks and to get rid of him.

In just a few days, the street where he lived filled with electricians and road workers — plainclothes policemen armed to the teeth. Had he watched them carefully, Mesrine would have realized these men knew nothing about the work they were pretending to do. They spent their time shifting about, spying on him awkwardly. But, intoxicated by an overdose of self-esteem, the criminal didn't notice anything and lost the final battle.

It was 3:15 p.m. on November 2, 1979. The man who had so often declared, "*You'll have to shoot me like a dog, otherwise I'll shoot everyone*," was about to meet his preferred fate. Near Porte de Clignancourt, his car was surrounded by unmarked police vehicles in heavy traffic. The driver of a grey van beside him gestured for him to let it pass. Obliging, Mesrine pulled back behind the van — unaware that his executioners were inside.

Suddenly, all the vehicles around him stopped. The van's rear tarpaulin shot up, revealing four automatic weapons pointed directly at him. He was given a chance to surrender but, according to police —and true to his word— he bent down to grab a gun or grenade from the floor. The officers opened fire, riddling him with bullets. Mesrine died as he had lived.

Photo-Police wrote unpoetically: "*Mesrine's body was turned into a veritable sieve.*" One of the high-caliber bullets lodged in his temple, probably fired from the left by the officer beside him. As journalists and photographers rushed to the scene, *Photo-Police* reported, "*The police expressed satisfaction at having finally cornered the man who had played with them for so long*."

Thus lived and died the gangster Jacques Mesrine.

Mesrine, the Murdered Murderer. [Priv. Coll.]

TIERCÉ DIMANCHE A AUTEUIL (Grand Prix d'Automne)
Le Parisien
FOOTBALL
Exploit de Paris S.-G. contre Strasbourg : 1-0 (à Cisano en riche)
LA FIN D'UN TUEUR

A Century Ago: The Staircase to Heaven

9 January 1927

On January 9, 1927, Ameen Lawand, proud owner of the Cinéma Laurier Palace —a building with a fake brick façade at 16,682-Est Rue Sainte-Catherine in Montreal— rubbed his hands together in satisfaction. He smiled as he watched the long queue of children snake across the dirty white snowbanks.

Around two hundred and fifty children crowded and jostled excitedly in front of the cinéma, their line stretching all the way to the corner of Dézéry and Sainte-Catherine streets. They were impatient to move forward into the humid warmth of the enormous hall. With tickets at 25 cents for the floor and 15 cents for the balcony, the day promised to be highly profitable.

Ameen, little concerned with respecting the law, admitted all the children who came, even those under sixteen who, according to Québec law, should have been accompanied by an adult. Had he followed this regulation, his theatre would have remained nearly empty, leaving him unable to cover expenses. So he turned a blind eye not only to their ages but to their sheer numbers. He even allowed children to sit in the aisles when seats ran out.

Besides, no one could choose films better than Ameen. Today's "*matinee*" included newsreels, a cartoon, and two silent films released in 1926 : a comedy called *Get 'Em Young* and *Sparrows* starring beautiful Mary Pickford, who made generations of men from seven to seventy-seven dream — like Tintin would, two years later, in 1929.

Ameen liked to keep the queues extending far into the street even though he could have let them wait inside the spacious lobby. But he preferred to show the neighbourhood how popular and profitable his films were. After all, crowds attract crowds, as everyone knows. And if a competitor happened to walk by, he would turn yellow with envy.

The two silent films were subtitled only in English, as powerful American distributors, disrespectful of Canadian culture, had already monopolised Canada's film market, forcing Quebecers to admire only Hollywood stars.

From the entrance, Ameen spotted the red toques of little René Benjamin Roy and his brother. Further down the line, in the milky vapour of hundreds of frozen breaths, the Martel children grew impatient: Philibert (thirteen), watching closely over Éva (eight) and their youngest sister Yvette (seven). Regulars, all of them.

These children adored cinema, this marvellous new art invented by the Lumière Brothers. On Sunday mornings, they went to Mass, and in the afternoon, before vespers, they went "aux vues," [they went "to views"] as they called it. In 1927, cinema —still known as the "cinematograph"— had not yet learned to speak. And though Gaumont and others could colour films, by hand, frame by frame, the vast majority remained black and white. Cinemas spread like wildfire across *La Belle Province*.

When everyone had finally entered and sat down —except those crammed into the aisles— the show began in hushed admiration. Newsreels and cartoons played, followed by the first film. Suddenly, a thin plume of smoke rose from the floor. Let us hear from the direct witnesses.

Sixteen-year-old Antoine Girouard, sitting on the balcony with two of his brothers, said simply :

—*I noticed flames coming out of a crack in the floor*.

Ten-year-old Ernie Fitzpatrick, who lived two doors down from the cinema, was standing in one of the balcony aisles :

—*It was a comedy movie. We were all laughing. I had been there about half an hour, standing in the aisle because I couldn't find a seat. The boy who paid for me had a seat, and his brother was standing next to me. We saw flames and smoke coming out from the front row in the centre of the balcony*.

Suddenly a cry rang out from above :

—Au feu ! Fire !

It was an usher raising the alarm. At first there was only astonishment in the dark hall. The film had just begun, and minds and bodies were enthralled by the screen. The children struggled to return to reality. More screams arose, and slowly the audience awoke from their dream world, plunging without transition into chaos and panic.

Ushers yelled for calm, insisting it was only a little smoke. But abruptly, red flames, glowing like the phosphorescent eyes of wild animals, pierced the smoke and began to grow. An usher on the ground floor shouted for spectators *to leave calmly*. This was done without panic downstairs, but on the balcony it was another matter.

Wilfrid Paré recalled :

—I was in the downstairs hall when the fire started. I was seating people. I saw smoke coming from the balcony floor and the ushers throwing water on it.

On the balcony, children in total panic rushed to the east staircase, quickly congesting the exit. Smoke blinded them, preventing them from seeing the west staircase was almost empty. No usher thought to direct them there; after all, most employees were teenagers themselves. Anyone with the presence of mind to use the west staircase escaped safely.

At first, the descent down the east staircase went relatively well. Children streamed down like a waterfall. But five steps from the entrance hall, tragedy struck. Packed tightly, pushed from behind, some stumbled and fell on the steep steps. Panic is contagious; it seized every mind. Screams filled the air. Those who fell were trampled by those behind. The stronger children climbed over the fallen in desperation. Within a single minute, the staircase was blocked from floor to ceiling by a suffocating, screaming, dying mass.

Firefighters and police arrived without delay. The fire itself became secondary. Rescuers pulled at the compact heap with all their might. Twenty men pulling each other by their leather belts struggled to extract the children from the tangled mass.

Firefighters drilled an opening through the east stairwell wall to evacuate children from above the human “plug,” thickening by the second. Through this hole, a human chain was formed, cutting into the mass from both ends. Despite their valiant efforts,

almost all those pulled out had already died. Two or three boys managed to utter their names before expiring.

Sixteen-year-old Antoine Girouard recounted :

—*Everyone rushed to evacuate. I was less than five steps from the bottom when I was jostled and fell. Three dead boys were under me when police pulled me out, and five or six wounded boys had to be removed before they reached me. I was crushed against the steps; it broke my back. Firefighters sprayed us with water. That's what saved many from burning alive. When they picked me up, I was soaked to the bone, but I was alive.*

Girouard survived with bruises and burns. He was taken to Montreal General Hospital.

Ten-year-old Earl Fitzpatrick said :

—*Men were using fire extinguishers, saying it wasn't serious. But the smoke filled our throats and everyone started running. I prayed and jumped over seats and people.*

He crawled over the writhing mass on the stairs, slipping into the lobby where helping hands carried him outside. His lungs were slightly affected, but his ordeal was far from the worst.

He had come with brothers Michael (fourteen) and Eddy (twelve), Murphy. Michael was the only victim. Eddy recalled :

—Michael found a seat right away. I stayed in the aisle with Earl. When the fire broke out, I saw only smoke. I ran to the balcony's back, climbed onto the ledge, and a man with a handkerchief over his mouth pulled me out the window.

Twelve-year-old Albert Makin escaped easily from his floor seat with his brother as soon as they smelled smoke.

Thirteen-year-old Roger Frappier jumped over the balcony railing into the seats below:

—I didn't see flames, just smoke and heard screams. Ushers told us to stay calm, but others shouted 'Fire!' I ran up the balcony but couldn't go further; smoke choked me. I went back, jumped over the railing, and ran out."

Roger had come with his half-brothers Paul and Roland Le Duc, aged eleven and thirteen. Paul survived by crawling over the mass blocking the stairs, wounded but able to flee. Roger remained in shock hours later, recalling horrors he had witnessed, including a mother vainly trying to push through the crowd with her baby.

One man, perhaps seeking heroism, claimed :

—I saw ushers throwing water on the fire. I shouted to evacuate calmly. On the balcony, a fat woman blocked the stairwell, so I gave her a strong push. Then I ran to the east staircase, saw the human plug, broke a window, and threw out nine children. I think they were all dead. When I went back in, the smoke overwhelmed me, and firefighters pulled me out."

Constable Albert Boisseau lost three children. Off duty but nearby, he rushed to help firefighters evacuate victims, working feverishly, knowing his children were inside. He recognised his son's body among those lined up outside. Unable to find his two daughters, he went to the morgue, where he found them.

Another father searched desperately for his daughter, Lucienne McCrae, only to find her hours later at Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, injured but alive. Her friend Lucienne de Celles, trampled in the panic, escaped with a broken rib and internal bruising.

Young Joseph Vallée was saved by an emergency exit firefighters chopped into the wall. Near asphyxiation, he told reporters he had seen flames rising from the balcony floor near his seat in the fourth row, feeling the heat as the fire spread towards him from the projection room.

In their terror, all the children rushed to the east staircase, while the west remained almost empty.

Burnt Façade of Cinéma Laurier Palace .[Pr.Coll]

The smoke that rapidly filled the room soon made it impossible for anyone to assess the situation. The flames seemed to have vanished, swallowed by the thick black cloud. From that moment on, only the children running towards the east staircase had any

sense of direction. This panic created what is known as Panurge's syndrome: they all followed one another towards the same exit – towards death.

Joseph Vallée had rushed into the staircase on the left side of the balcony just as the firefighters arrived in front of the cinema. Eventually, he was pushed towards the gaping hole in the façade, as the flood of children could no longer force its way through the pile of bodies blocking the deadly staircase.

Next to young Vallée lay Jean-Paul Paquet, ten years old. The child had a burn on his cheek and was struggling to breathe. Yet he forgot his pain to ask whether his mother and father had managed to escape safely. In the chaos, he had lost them and since then had no idea what had become of them.

Jean-Paul, like Joseph Vallée, recalled that the fire had broken out very close to the projection booth. He had tried to reach one of the balcony stairs but, unable at first to find the stairwell opening, had been swept away by the crowd. After much blind groping in the choking smoke, he finally grasped the banister at the top of the east staircase. Clinging to it with one hand and shielding his burning eyes with the other, he began to descend, careful not to lose his footing. He had only taken two steps when someone violently pushed him. Thrown against the edge of the stairs, he was trampled and stumbled over by the frantic crowd.

Still, Jean-Paul managed to keep his composure and, despite his pain, allowed himself to be carried down to the last step. In this awkward position, he reached the bottom of the stairs and rolled onto the floor until he could crawl out of the stampede and stand up. This was, by God's grace, before the stairwell was completely blocked.

Jean-Paul remembered that one of the rescuers, probably thinking his clothes were on fire, had aimed a water hose at him. He lost consciousness under the blessed coolness and only regained his senses in the ambulance rushing him to the hospital.

One of the quiet heroes of the tragedy was Émile Massicotte, the projectionist. When the stampede began, he rushed out of his booth and soon encountered children packed into the stairwell. He opened a window and, seeing a deep accumulation of snow on the metal canopy below, began dropping as many children as he could onto this improvised mattress. He saved around twenty of them before the searing smoke drove him away.

Once the last victim was freed and evacuated, firefighters turned their hoses on the fire. The flames had already breached the balcony walls and the cinema's façade along Sainte-Catherine Street. The blaze was quickly brought under control. Most victims had died of suffocation, as is almost always the case in fires. Their bodies, already lifeless, bore third-degree burns.

Amid the deafening roar of motor pumps, the fire that had consumed the building like an apocalyptic hydra was doused by tons of water. On the sidewalks, the small lifeless bodies lay side by side. As we have said, the dead and wounded were quickly separated. Priests administered last rites to children desperately searching for breath they could no longer find. Under the psychological effect of these spiritual ministrations, some seemed to revive for a moment, only to die soon after – perhaps the best blessing Death could offer.

Fire stations and police stations near the blaze were turned into temporary morgues. Ambulances rushed the wounded to regional hospitals. News of the tragedy spread quickly, and anxious

parents hurried to the scene of horror "without hats or tuques" – only those who know Montreal's cold can appreciate this detail. Police were strict with onlookers but compassionate with those who had lost a loved one. Security forces and ambulance crews worked with speed and dedication.

In the early afternoon, before ambulances arrived with their comfortable stretchers, city taxis, quicker to respond, rushed to the scene to offer free rides. Some funeral car hearses, seeking new customers and lured by easy profit, even arrived before them.

Every hospital in the city sent ambulances and doctors, many of whom worked in the Siberian cold without coats or head coverings. Neighborhood physicians answered distress calls, volunteering their services. All police ambulances were dispatched to the scene.

Despite this semblance of organization –improvised as it was– many children remained unaccounted for. Some parents, unsure if their children had even gone to the movies, spent endless hours watching in terror as wounded and dead were carried away, fearing theirs might be among them. Anxious phone calls flooded police stations, hospitals, and the morgue. These anguished parents spent a nightmarish evening waiting to learn if their child was among those little tortured, sometimes unrecognizable bodies.

Long after the last clouds of water vapor and smoke had lifted, the site of the fire resembled a giant sculpture of ice, where stalactites and stalagmites mingled, adorned with heavy frozen lace hanging from electrical and telephone wires. Through this petrified shell, one could see the cinema's large entrance hall, with the two staircases leading up to the balcony – including the one on the right, deadly. Two side doors had probably allowed some to escape onto

Rue Dézéry. The ceiling of the balcony was badly damaged, blackened by flames and smoke, and its floor was burned through in several places. The windows overlooking Sainte-Catherine Street were shattered. The theatre floor was covered with water, and the beautiful ice festoons could not hide the charred scars of devastation.

Mothers and fathers roamed the city in tears, going from hospital to hospital. Everyone undertook this "Way of the Cross of misfortune" – full of hope, in truth – to find their child. Receptionists at the four main hospitals were besieged with urgent requests for names of new patients. Staff did the impossible to respond to their feverish demands. Nuns and nurses had to be gentle yet firm, for many of the victims had already left this world of suffering for the paradise of children.

The somber chanting of *De Profundis* and the dark, flowing cassocks of priests added an unreal, pathetic note to this gloomy tableau. Families erupted in uncontrollable cries of joy when they found their children alive, momentarily forgetting their neighbours who remained in despair.

Early reports from *Hôpital Général de Montréal* said fifteen wounded and dead had been received. At *Hôpital Notre-Dame*, of the ten children cared for, one –Ernest Robichaud, sixteen– suffered third-degree burns and was not expected to survive. By late afternoon, his parents still did not know his whereabouts. The other victims there had suffered minor injuries and suffocation trauma, and doctors believed they would all recover.

Only five children were admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital, including a girl who died shortly after arrival. She was not identified and her body was sent directly to the municipal

morgue. The others suffered from asphyxiation and minor bruises but survived. At Hôpital Notre-Dame, three children shared a room, all victims of respiratory distress. Two of them spoke briefly when their breathing improved. The third remained in a coma.

At every hospital, police cordons held back the grim crowd desperate to know whether they could still hope to take their child home. With reddened eyes, they stood silently in line. Only the hysterical cries of a mother discovering her child's cold body shattered the hush, rousing others from their stunned trance. The less fortunate left quietly for the municipal morgue, the final step of their ordeal, when all hope was gone.

That austere building marked the end of this tragic journey for victims and their families alike. Relatives began arriving at the morgue shortly after 5 p.m. An hour later, the place was besieged by desperate crowds. All evening, a constant stream of new arrivals gathered on cold, slippery Rue Saint-Vincent, hesitating before the morgue's agonizing door. Many lingered outside, unable to face the truth, before summoning superhuman courage, drawing a last breath of fresh air, and crossing the threshold.

Inside, in the hot, humid air, they joined the silent mass waiting to identify their children. Guided by policemen, they formed a tragic humanity that filled the entire entrance hall. In carefully counted groups, they were ushered into the mortuary rooms.

Some men lit cigarettes to hide their emotion, believing they would lose their virility if they showed their tears. Others, unable to master their nerves, wept openly.

—*She was only fourteen… Such a lovely girl… And yours ?*

People found some comfort sharing this common grief. Among the most pitiful figures was Alpheda Arpin, a large fireman with a red, swollen face from crying. On duty at Fire Station No. 13 on Rue de Rouville when the alarm sounded, he knew his mischievous six-year-old son Gaston was at the cinema with a family niece. He worked with feverish determination, saving other children, but found his own only that evening in the morgue.

The line of death – as an English-speaking journalist called it– zigzagged from the door to the coroner's office. In large rooms off the lobby, parents searched for their children's bodies while curious onlookers were turned away by provincial police. From time to time, cries and sobs broke the heavy silence as a parent collapsed in grief. Some, unable to bear the sight, fainted into merciful unconsciousness.

Mrs. Séguin, from Rue Lafontaine, lost her daughter. She stood next to a woman whose child had survived and had accompanied little Simone to the cinema. Mrs. Francoeur, widowed for just six months and living on three dollars a week, received the final blow that day : her sixteen-year-old daughter perished in the fire. It was the girl's first time going to the movies. She had taken her younger sister Lorette, who escaped the flames. Now Lorette sat collapsed, silent, as if lost on another planet, blaming herself: Had her sister died trying to save her ?

Joseph Hétu, inconsolable, sobbed as he explained that his wife, away in the country, had left their son in his care, and he had not yet found the courage to tell her the terrible truth.

Without being asked, all the city's funeral directors sent their magnificent Cadillac hearses to claim the bodies. Children from this poor French-speaking neighborhood had dreamt of such

luxury cars in other circumstances. Their presence was far from disinterested : for decades, embalming had become widespread in North America, promoted by capitalist industry to turn grief into profit, just as Halloween, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Valentine's, and especially Christmas had become marketing opportunities to drive unnecessary spending.

Modern embalming involves draining the body's blood and replacing it with chemical fluid. To accelerate the process, embalmers connect a suction pump to the femoral vessels in the feet and a pressure pump to the jugular veins. The synchronized action of these machines quickly empties the body, though clogged arteries can cause bloody "*explosions*" that soil the embalmer's coat and mask. For this reason, relatives are never invited to witness the procedure. The blood is collected in a bottle beneath the coffin's flap. The face and hands are covered with thick foundation and makeup, hair cut, nails manicured. The result can render the deceased unrecognizable.

Ecclesiastical authorities advised grieving families to ignore these undertakers, who swarmed around the dead, praising embalming's supposed benefits : "*I know you love your child and want the best for them*" – an irresistible argument for mourning parents.

After the families identified the swollen, disfigured bodies, they were sent to the coroner's office for questioning. There, Coroner McMahon, who had investigated crimes and accidents in Montréal for over forty years, opened his inquest on January 10 to allow families to reclaim their loved ones quickly. In the small grey room with frosted windows, matching the defeated faces of the bereaved, each was asked :

—*Was this child accompanied by an adult?"*

Almost all answered "no."

—*And did the child have your permission to go to the cinema ?*

Three-quarters of parents again said no, perhaps fearing prosecution. The coroner, with a threatening air, declared that only three or four victims had been legally permitted to be in the cinema unaccompanied.

Today, it would be the authorities who feared lawsuits for failing to enforce provincial laws. Back then, they reserved the right to blame poor parents for everything.

Touching conversations then took place between the parents themselves:

—*What is your child's name ?*

—*René Benjamin.*

—*Where do you live ?*

—*At 1440 Rue Préfontaine.*

—*How old was he ?*

—Fourteen years old. In fact, today is his fourteenth birthday. He and his brother went to the cinema to celebrate. His brother escaped unharmed.

Almost all of the children identified had gone to the cinema unaccompanied, although their ages ranged from five to early adolescence. The cinema staff had clearly allowed them to buy tickets without question. Most of the children, however, had obtained their parents' permission. One father declared that he had forbidden his child to go; perhaps it was a lie intended to protect himself from possible legal repercussions.

Thomas Girard, who had lost his son Raoul, insisted that Raoul had not gone to the cinema without permission. According to him, his son had been there a few times, but never against his father's wishes. The boy was in the company of his thirteen-year-old brother, who survived. Joseph Hétu, who spoke later, claimed that his ten-year-old son Adrien was among the victims. Adrien had been with his eight-year-old brother, who survived.

East Stairwell (Priv. Coll.)

—My children were allowed to go to another cinema. Not to this one!"
—Why not this one? Did you think it was dangerous ?

—Yes, there weren't enough emergency exits.

—How did you know, Monsieur Hétu ?

—I had been there myself on other occasions.

Dr. Fontaine, the forensic pathologist at the morgue, announced that he had examined seventy-two bodies during the night. He noted several causes of death: some had been crushed by falling beams or by the feet of those fleeing; others had been burned to the third degree; still others had died of smoke inhalation.

This long procession of mourners moved slowly from the coroner's court upstairs down the "*stairs of despair*." No ordeal was spared the unfortunate parents by the forensic doctors, who were devoid of warmth and imbued with their discretionary powers. Downstairs, Dr. Wilfrid Derome issued the dreaded blue certificate that confirmed the unthinkable and allowed them to take their beloved child's body home.

All afternoon and late into the evening, the formidable Chief Coroner McMahon remained in his courtroom, asking more or less accusatory questions with authority and sometimes abruptness, recording each answer in his register.

By midnight, he had issued fifty death certificates out of the seventy-two bodies lying in the municipal morgue. All but five of the victims had been identified. By the end of the following morning, these five remained unclaimed, and the morgue stayed open

throughout the night to allow relatives to come and identify them. Two days later, two children were still in the mortuary, a boy and a girl, who were finally identified. They were waiting for the undertakers, who were now in no hurry since their contracts had been signed.

Speculation about the cause of the fire that triggered the deadly panic was widespread. Most people believed — and cinema owners among them, since it absolved them of some blame — that the fire had been started by a cigarette dropped into a floor crack by a spectator.

But the possibility of faulty electrical wiring also had to be considered, despite the wires being protected by metal sheaths. Even an electrical engineer could not reconstruct precisely how the fire had started and spread. No firm conclusion could be drawn. The fire had broken out under a seat in the centre of the balcony. The "floor of the gods" was thin, and a cigarette or match could have fallen through a slit. Property damage was confined to the balcony.

Little shoes, scraps of clothing, a torn coat, and broken spectacles were all that remained of the fatal stampede. These poignant relics were found afterwards in the disaster area, on the stairs, and in the side aisles.

The fire marshals immediately began their official investigation into the disaster on Tuesday, January 11, 1927. Coroner McMahon quickly adjourned the hearing, discharging the jury until Thursday after hearing from a few witnesses, including Ameen Lawand, the theatre's owner, who was released on $500 bail, while three of his employees were released on $190 each.

After hearing from Dr. René Fontaine, the forensic officer who had examined the seventy-two bodies, Chief Coroner McMahon stated that he would await the findings and verdict of the fire commissioners. James McIsaac, *Chief Inspector of the Superintendent of Electrical Engineering*, testified that he had issued an injunction to the cinema. When asked about inspection frequency, he replied that the last inspection had been done in December, less than a month before the fire. The hearing was paused there.

What decisions and measures would the Montréal authorities and the provincial government take regarding the disaster ? According to Québec law, no child unaccompanied by an adult could be admitted to any movie theatre. The prohibition stated :

"*No person in charge of a cinema where films are shown by means of the cinematograph, no manager of such an establishment, shall in any way admit to the viewing of such films any child under sixteen years of age, unless accompanied by their father, guardian, teacher, or a guardian specially authorized by the father or mother*."

An exception to this strict law, passed in 1919 at the request of the *Provincial Bureau of Film Censorship*, allowed unaccompanied children to attend films "*specially intended for young people*," typically patriotic, educational, or humorous productions. The penalty for violators was a $50 fine or up to one month's imprisonment for a first offence, and for repeat offences, a fine of $50 to $100 or two months' imprisonment if unpaid.

In the grieving city, the disaster was widely discussed. Politicians' views were quoted with respect — far more than they are today. The general opinion was that the law should henceforth be

strictly enforced in all cinemas across the province, without exception.

Justice Lacroix of the Children's Court — a very conservative judge, comparable to those who, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, tried to curb children's excessive use of television, video games, and the Internet — stated :

"This terrible accident at the Laurier Palace confirms my fears. Almost without exception, the children who lost their lives were between four and sixteen years old. Since I became a juvenile court judge, I have been urging the municipal council to enforce provincial laws prohibiting unaccompanied children under sixteen from attending the cinema. Nothing has been done! The law exists but is ignored. No one cares, and now we see the result!

"I know that the vast majority of children who go to the cinema are unaccompanied. Moreover, in this case, many went without their parents' permission or even against their orders. Ordinary movies are not for children, and I do not believe they should watch them, even accompanied, before the age of twelve. A child's mind cannot grasp the complex problems and themes presented. They force themselves to understand things beyond their faculties, resulting in nervous strain. The next day at school, they are restless and distracted by what they absorbed at the cinema. Is there any benefit in all this? Certainly not!

"I have seen children leaving the cinema with their little palms soaked in sweat from nervous tension. Cinema undoubtedly influences juvenile delinquency. Boys and girls of all ages are drawn to it. Those without money may steal to pay for it. At present, I have seventy-five boys in my reform centre who stole to go to the cinema. They even skip school to go every day for weeks. I will

continue to fight for children under twelve to be banned from the cinema, accompanied or not. As for this particular fire, it is obvious that children under twelve are not mature enough to know how to react when panic breaks out."

Those were happy times when reformatories were full of rascals whose only crime was skipping school to watch a movie and stealing a few coins to pay for it.

On January 10, a message arrived from Paris. Aristide Briand, Minister of Foreign Affairs, instructed Baron R. de Vitrolles, Consul Général de France in Montréal, to officially convey the condolences of the French people to the Canadian government. Similar messages piled up on Mayor Médéric Martin's desk.

The Association of Cinema Owners held an emergency meeting on the evening of January 9 to express sympathy to the victims' families. Members voted to raise funds to help pay for the funerals and proposed expanding this initiative to other theatre owners to build a relief fund of $20,000 to $30,000.

The mayor was right: given the scale of its city and the cosmopolitan nature of its population, Montréal —then the largest city in Canada and the fourth-largest French-speaking city in the world after Paris, Algiers, and Léopoldville [Kinshasa, Congo]— had until then been remarkably spared from major fires. The city's archives recorded only three events with a significant number of casualties.

As always, stories of miraculous escapes or astounding premonitions circulated alongside fervent prayers for the little victims.

One such "*urban legend*" told of three children whose weekly treat was movie tickets, usually accompanied by their sixteen-year-old sister. That day, she had been given permission to leave work early to take them to the cinema at the start of the screening. She left work early and went home, but the meal wasn't ready yet — families still ate together and at fixed times back then. As a result, they left late, and when they arrived at the Laurier Palace, they discovered the tragedy.

Another girl, the sister of one of the victims, was delayed because she had to finish her chores before going to the cinema. Her employer offered her double pay to stay half an hour longer. She accepted, and so was not beside her brother when his body was identified at the morgue.

The funeral was deeply moving. It began at 9 a.m. on Tuesday at the Église de la Nativité, at the corner of Rue Ontario and Rue Dézéry in the Hochelaga district. Two rows of catafalques lined the nave, supporting the coffins of the boys and girls. Notre-Dame de Montréal tolled its mourning bell for thirty minutes to mark the start of the ceremony. Crowds gathered at the disaster site, the victims' homes, and the church. Fifty policemen managed the silent throng, which even tried to invade the homes of the deceased children. An officer had to be stationed outside each house.

In a curious custom now obsolete, a second ceremony, simpler but equally poignant, was held that afternoon for the youngest victims who had not made their *first communion* and were thus not considered "*Children of God*."

The *Toronto Catholic School Board* sent condolences to the families, and Toronto children held a requiem mass at St. Michael's Cathedral.

Viscount Willingdon, Governor General of Canada, did not consider it necessary to attend the funeral. Probably because he was not Catholic, he was simply represented by one of his Catholic subordinates, Brigadier-Général Émile de Brébeuf-Panet. After all, Willingdon did not need to please voters, since he held his post as a reward for political services rendered to England.

Today, one of Canada's largest shopping malls is in Quebec City. It is called Place Laurier — but its name has nothing to do with this terrible tragedy.

La Patrie

MONTREAL — CANADA — LUNDI 10 JANVIER 1927

SOIXANTE-DIX-SEPT ENFANTS S'ECRASENT A MORT DANS UN CINEMA

COURTE ENQUETE DU CORONER- CE MATIN- AJOURNEE A JEUDI PROCHAIN – (Voir détails à la troisième page)

Le feu se déclare dans une petite salle de l'Est de Montréal; une panique s'ensuit; une fillette trébuche dans un étroit escalier et une centaine d'enfants s'entassent derrière elle en une effroyable mêlée, d'où soixante-dix-sept ne sortent pas vivants. Et cet escalier n'était pas même à trois pas de la rue, dont une mince muraille de brique le séparait.

LE RECIT DU SINISTRE ET LES EPISODES DE LA TRAGEDIE

LA FOULE ASSISTE, TERRIFIEE

C'EST LA QUE PERDIRENT 77 ENFANTS

A LA MORGUE A MIDI

77 victimes, toutes identifiées, 68 cadavres réclamés par les parents.

LES PROCUREURS DE M. AMEEN LAWAND

COUPON No 8

Virtue vs **Vice and Vice Versa**

The west coast of Canada was once —in fact until the mid-19th century— part of a vast territory known as the **Oregon Territory**. It belonged to no one (except its Native population) and yet everyone coveted it. The four nations involved — the United States, Spain, Canada, and Russia — encouraged their citizens to settle this neutral territory.

Since the *North West Company* was exploiting furs in the region, many French-speaking Canadians settled there, on lands that had never known the plough or the blade of a spade. In fact, the first farmer in Oregon was a former French-Canadian trapper named ***Étienne Lucier***, who, after working many years for the NWC, decided to claim farmland. Others joined him, and the area became known as ***French Prairie***. However, agricultural work, done mainly in summer, did not prevent them from trapping in winter. All these Canadians married Indian women, as they did not have the leisure to return home for wives, unlike ***Jean-Marie Abadie***, the hero of this authentic story, who would do so years later.

One centre of this settlement was the fertile ***Walla Walla Valley***, lying at the foot of the *Blue Mountains* and richly irrigated by the Walla Walla, Touchet, Mill, Snake, and the great Columbia River. In 1818, ***Fort Nez Percé*** was established there by the North West Company.

In the 1820s, the North West Company was forced by the British government to merge with the Hudson's Bay Company,

which also employed French-Canadian *coureurs de bois* and voyageurs, who were retained as employees.

In 1835, under the influence of these French-Canadian *coureurs de bois*, several Indian tribes — the Têtes-Plates, Nez Percés, Pends-d'Oreilles, and Cœurs-d'Alène — sent a request to St. Louis, Missouri, asking for Catholic missionaries to evangelize them.

Jean-Marie Abadie had preceded them in 1834, settling in the Willamette Valley even before the arrival of Catholic missionaries.

Presbyterian missionaries *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman*, along with Reverend Henry Spalding and his wife, established a mission at Waiilatpu near Walla Walla. The Whitman mission prospered — if not spiritually, at least materially — establishing a vast estate of 300 arpents on fertile land, with a sawmill, dam, and orchards. But on November 29, 1847, the Protestant mission was annihilated during an Indian uprising, which spared the French-speaking settlers. Federal troops quickly suppressed the tribes and confined them to reservations.

On May 2, 1843, a meeting was held at the general store founded by French-Canadian *Xavier Matthieu* at Champoeg (Champeaux) on the Willamette River. Former Canadian employees of the *Hudson's Bay Company* and new American settlers voted to create Oregon's first provisional government. Thus, Champoeg became the cradle of Oregon. If it did not remain the state capital, it was because it was entirely destroyed by an unexpected flood of the calm Willamette River in 1861.

In 1856, the year Fort Nez Percé was renamed Fort Walla Walla**,** Jean-Marie Abadie, a Gascon, arrived in this French-speaking community.

Little is known about Abadie's journey. He came from a small village in Gascony, *Guizerix***,** on the border of the Hautes-Pyrénées and Gers. Tempted by adventure, he left the gentle safety of Gascony's motherly hillsides to conquer America, landing probably in New York in 1855. After a few hesitant months in the East, he took the *Oregon Trail* towards the Pacific.

Between 1840 and 1870, half a million adventurers travelled this trail. They were ordinary people seeking a new life; people with nothing to lose in an overpopulated, hyper-stratified Europe prone to sterile wars. They embarked on a dangerous 3,000-kilometre journey in canvas-covered wagons drawn by horses or oxen across endless plains and deadly deserts. Of these, fifty thousand were women. Some men planned to return to their country to find wives, as Abadie did. Others simply took Indian wives, as most Canadians did.

Sometimes, a ship would dock with a cargo of women, and eager men waited on the docks, ready to offer them the moon to marry. The competition was fierce, and women knew how to bargain; ultimately, it was they who decided.

At Boise, Idaho, the trail split: the northern fork led to Oregon, the southern to California. In 1849, the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill triggered the *California Gold Rush*. From then on, most wagons turned south. Yet this rush also spurred Oregon's development, as California's population boom increased food demand, particularly wheat.

When *Jean-Marie Abadie* arrived in 1856, the Walla Walla area resembled everything Hollywood has shown: cowboys working ranches, highwaymen robbing banks and stagecoaches, ruthless outlaws slaughtering anyone for property, vigilante committees hanging suspects without trial, and saloons full of prostitutes in frilly dresses and daring necklines. European women were so rare that men were ready *to kill* rivals or build golden bridges for even the plainest women.

This was the *Wild West*, where gold ruled all. Reading this story, one imagines Abadie was deeply affected. This may explain why he later returned to Guizerix to find a wife, though convincing a proper young Gascon girl to join him in such a distant and dangerous land was no small feat.

With no stagecoaches in remote Walla Walla, travel required makeshift boats. Abadie worked for other francophones to survive, learn English, and plan his future. The area produced wheat and food for California.

In 1859, as Oregon became the 33rd US state, Abadie worked hard to achieve his goals. When the Civil War broke out two years later, he had become a gold prospector, seizing the new gold rush near Walla Walla in 1860. He began washing gold-bearing sands with a pack-saddle and sieve. Though he found no nuggets, he amassed a small fortune in gold dust and flakes through years of toil and privation.

Most gold miners squandered their earnings nightly in taverns, on women, thieves, inflated general stores, or pastors demanding 10% for a place in Heaven. But the austere, virtuous Jean-Marie Abadie saved his earnings for comfortable old age — which

he never enjoyed, as he died at fifty-three. Others spent his wealth alongside his sweet wife. Such is life !

Let us pause here in Abadie's life to allow this industrious Gascon a short moment to appreciate the material wealth he so patiently amassed. Having become rich and the owner of a 120-arpent property, he naturally thought of starting a family. Man believes himself unique, yet ends up repeating the gestures of his kind. But first, he needed a wife, preferably younger, as he approached forty.

For reasons revealed later in his will, he decided to return to his beloved Pyrenean village to find a pure and virtuous girl worthy of becoming the mother of his children — which he never had. He was confident his wealth would help. At the time, mixing of descendants was less common in France, whereas Canadians had married Christianized Indians or Irish Catholics for two centuries. As for the beautiful, swaying women of Oregon's saloons, they did not fit his standards for a mother, even if he occasionally enjoyed local saloons.

Jean-Marie Abadie left his adopted country for France at an undetermined date. The only clues we have are the records of the French-speaking parish in Walla Walla, which show he was there in 1860, 1877, and 1879:

In 1860, he was recorded as a witness at a baptism in St. Patrick's Church, Walla Walla.

On January 14, 1877: *We, the undersigned, baptized Marie Lina, aged five weeks, daughter of Romain Rémillard and Denise Raymond. Godfather: Jean-Marie Abadie; godmother: Julie Raymond. [Signed:] Charles Auguste Richard, priest.*

On September 30, 1879: *I, the undersigned, buried in St. Patrick's Cemetery the body of Émeline, daughter of Antoine Moran and N. Gagnon, aged 16 years. Witnesses: Gédéon Gravel and Jean-Marie Abadie. [Signed:] P. Paaps, priest.*

At some point, probably in 1872 or 1873, Abadie left Walla Walla on one of the Oregon Steamboat Navigation Company's vessels. He followed the Walla Walla River down to its confluence with the Columbia — about fifty kilometers in total — then traveled along the Columbia to Portland–Fort Vancouver, a journey of roughly 350 kilometers that was extremely perilous, especially when crossing The Dalles. This stretch of rapids had been so named by French-Canadian voyageurs after the flat rocks that covered the river's shoals.

In the larger city of Portland, the Gascon found passage on a coastal schooner. The ship sailed down the Columbia estuary to the infamous bar at its mouth, near the aptly named Cape Disappointment, before entering the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific coast was magnificent – so beautiful, so wild, yet so formidable, with its violent, unpredictable winds that seemed to mock every sailing vessel, threatening to smash them for sport upon the countless reefs of black basalt scattered across the foaming sea with its treacherous currents. When the ocean became too fierce, the schooner would seek refuge in a quiet cove, setting out again as soon as the worst had passed.

After more than two weeks at sea, the vessel crossed the Golden Gate Strait – which at that time was not yet spanned by its famous bridge – and entered the gigantic bay of San Francisco, then just a small city of 57,000 inhabitants. There, the traveller enjoyed the calm waters that seemed almost lake-like after the turmoil of the ocean. The schooner then sailed up the Sacramento

River to reach the town of Sacramento itself, which had rapidly developed as the western terminus of the first and only transcontinental railroad, completed on May 10, 1869.

That year of 1869 sounded the death knell for the famous Oregon Trail, now almost entirely abandoned by ox- and horse-drawn wagons. Immigrants far preferred taking the train to Sacramento.

Jean-Marie Abadie undoubtedly used this railway on his return journey to France. From Sacramento, it was a week of winding through the Rockies, followed by another seemingly endless week across the monotonous, straight tracks of the Great Plains.

Exhausted by this long journey – during which travellers faced constant risks of attack by Native warriors or outlaws – passengers finally arrived in New York, after countless changes of rail line in major cities across the Midwest and East. The journey was gruelling, but nothing compared to crossing the continent in an ox cart.

Another month on a transatlantic sailing ship brought Abadie back to Guizerix, his tiny native village of 450 inhabitants in the Hautes-Pyrénées, nestled at the foot of the massive mountain range of the same name. Guizerix recorded 435 inhabitants in the 1882 census, 419 in 1886, and only 120 by 2004. Its population continued to decline throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and into the twenty-first century.

The return of the "son Abadie" caused a great stir in the region. *"Lo qui seré pas jamès eiretèr e qui s'era anat estujar la sua misèria au luenh."* (He who would never inherit and who had gone to hide his misery far away.)

Jean-Marie had come back to find a wife and get married ! All the young women of the area must have wondered whether they would accept a marriage proposal from him.

Certainly, he claimed to be rich. From the generous gifts he distributed like a king, people assumed his bank account was well-stocked. But peasants have their feet firmly on the ground, and they are naturally suspicious – often with good reason. Was he not the youngest son, with no hope of inheritance, this Abadie who had vanished into the wilderness more than fifteen years earlier? That meant nothing to them. Where did he really come from, and what had he done? Perhaps he was just a poor *rastaquouère*! Where had he found all this money? *"A fine lie that comes from afar!"* they said.

And besides… he was no longer in his prime. At forty-three, a man was considered old, especially in an era when average life expectancy in Western countries was only forty years. Returned to find a wife? Strange indeed. Were there no women where he had been?

Jean-Marie, with his keen eye, immediately set his sights on one of his cousins, a girl barely sixteen or seventeen years old, who would have suited him perfectly. She had still been a child when he left the country, but now she had grown into a radiant beauty, and as everyone said, she possessed unfailing and valiant virtue. That's all I'm telling you!

In love, Jean-Marie wasted no time in asking his father to present an official proposal to his own brother, who, of course, was the girl's father. The two brothers discussed it at length and arranged all the material conditions. Everything seemed perfect. Jean-Marie asked for no dowry; on the contrary, he was ready to

shower gifts upon everyone. No one could have objected to such an advantageous alliance.

Unfortunately, the beautiful cousin stubbornly refused. She found him too old. Moreover, the idea of travelling to the ends of the earth did not tempt her in the slightest. With her physical beauty and moral qualities, she was confident she could find a husband and prosperity right there at home. No one could make her change her mind, to the immense disappointment and great humiliation of Jean-Marie, who had imagined the young woman could not resist the lure of his fortune.

He had wanted her to be *virtuous* and *incorruptible*. She was both. And his disappointment was all the greater for it.

Old photos and postcards of Trie-sur-Baïse - Town Hall of Trie-sur-Baïse and its villagede « l'Américain ». The church of Trise-sur-Baïse where Jean-Marie Abadie was married.

Jean-Marie searched again in his village. But what young girl could now respond to the advances of a man who had just suffered such a public slap in the face without becoming the laughingstock of the entire village? Some parents, no doubt, would not have spat upon such a windfall—and probably did their best to persuade their daughters—but all refused.

He was then forced to look in the surrounding villages, where people were less aware of his failed pursuits. Finally, he found his rare bird in the nearby town of Trie-sur-Baïse, in the Gers. Her name was Hortense Bruant. Indeed, she was the rare bird he had sought.

Old photos and postcards still show the town hall of Trie-sur-Baïse and its village, nicknamed "the village of the American," and the church where Jean-Marie Abadie married Hortense. The wedding was grand, just as Jean-Marie wanted to prove to the townspeople: his great wealth.

At last, the newlyweds packed their many bags and set off on the endless journey to the ends of the world. Hortense probably thought she would never see her native land again. She was wrong.

The story of Jean-Marie Abadie should have ended there. But it continued for a very long time… almost a century longer. One day in 1883, it was learned that Jean-Marie had died on Christmas Eve the previous year. Before dying, he had asked his wife to bring his body back to his native village. Even more remarkable, he had expressed his fifty-one wishes in his will, drawn up and opened before witnesses J. L. Sharpstein and B. L. Sharpstein of Walla Walla County, Washington Territory.

He appointed not only his wife but also two friends as co-executors, suggesting that his confidence in Hortense had its limits:

"I hereby appoint my wife Hortense Abadie, Henri Lamarche, Professor, and the Reverend Algidius Junger as executors of this instrument which contains my last will and testament, and as I have full confidence in their integrity, I will and order that my said executor and executors and each of them shall serve as such

and execute their mandate without furnishing any bond or security. In witness whereof, I have hereunto signed my name and affixed my seal this 21st day of December, 1882." [Signed:] *Jean-Marie Abadie.*

The will had been drafted in 1880, since it mentions Jean-Marie being fifty years old at the time, but it was updated on December 21, 1882, just three days before his death. Jean-Marie died on December 24, 1882, of a slow illness — cancer or tuberculosis, the two most frequent scourges of the time for a man in his early fifties, in that blessed era before AIDS, massacres, colossal heatwaves, and world wars.

In the Court of Evidence of Walla Walla County, the will was admitted on December 27, 1882. The judge certified that Jean-Marie Abadie had been of sound mind, under no coercion or threat, and fully competent to distribute his estate. Thanks to this clear, albeit indigestible, legal text, he settled his inheritance matters before passing away. Among his last wishes was his desire to be buried in France:

"*After my death, I ask that my body be transported to France and placed in a grave above ground, specially built for me in the cemetery of Guizerix, my native village. The sum devoted to this tomb must not exceed 2000 dollars; and as to the time and means of transporting my body, I leave it to the care of my wife and my executors."*

His wife and the other executors faithfully carried out his wish —imagine the logistical challenges this represented at the time— via Sacramento, California. Fortunately, the railway existed. One shudders to think of the ordeal Hortense would have

faced had she needed to transport his coffin by horse-drawn wagon across the North American deserts.

Finally, a magnificent mausoleum of immaculate white marble was built to allow the millionaire's body to rest above ground. When the church square was later turned into an asphalt car park, the cemetery gate was pushed back behind the mausoleum, leaving it standing alone in front of the entrance—probably not to the displeasure of Jean-Marie Abadie. The epitaph reads:

HERE RESTS JEAN-MARIE ABADIE BORN IN GUIZERIX DIED IN WALLA WALLA NORTH AMERICA DECEMBER 24, 1882 AGED 53 PRAY FOR HIM

But that was not all. The millionaire showered his family and friends with roses in the form of US dollars. His bequests totalled the astronomical sum of $73,561, not including notary fees and inheritance taxes in America and France. Adjusted for today's value, that amounts to roughly US$7,356,100. Many churches were repaired thanks to his generosity. While the young girls of Guizerix had turned their backs on him, he ensured that they would kneel and pray at his grave for his eternal rest. A fine revenge, thought the more devious minds.

Indeed, he created, in his fifty-first will, a "Prize of Virtue." The article reads:

"*After having paid all my legal debts and costs, and after satisfying all legacies, I give the remainder of my estate as follows: a quarter to my wife Hortense Abadie, a quarter to my nieces Léonie and Françoise Dupuy (an eighth each), and the remaining eighth to be invested to produce an annual income of 160 dollars, to be given each year to the most virtuous young girl in the parish*

of Guizerix, called the Rosière, on her wedding day, on the condition that both spouses come to pray at my grave on the same day."

The symbolic crown of roses thus became a sum of money — more attractive, more motivating. The special committee to choose the rose of the year was meticulously designated by Jean-Marie : the mayor, the parish priest, and three other members chosen by them.

The first awards, distributed in 1895 for the preceding years, were followed by protests erupting like forest fires in hot weather. Eternal jealousies, bitter quarrels, and slanderous denunciations tore apart the previously peaceful village. After three years, the committee decided to divide the prize equally among all brides of the year, without consideration of their wisdom or virtue. Jean-Marie must have been spinning in his marble mausoleum.

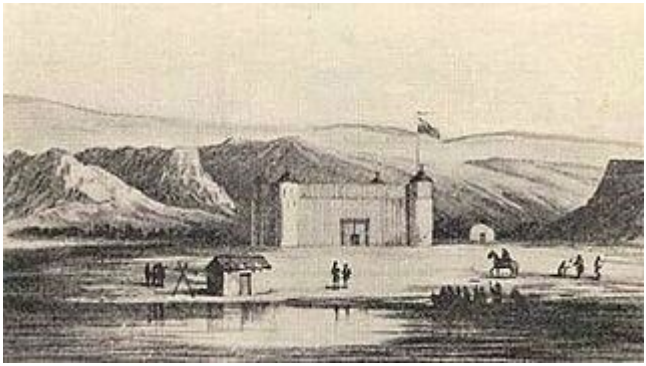
The Great War later decimated the youth and devalued the prize to a mere token. By 1959, it amounted to only $1.60 per girl after currency reform, shared equally with the joint blessing of the parish priest and prefecture.

Times had changed. Virtue flew in shreds. Marriage itself was disappearing, contraceptives decimated most of the French population, and abortion wiped out the few who managed to slip through. In 2025, France was adding only 30,000 births per year, compared to 700,000 immigrants. The French people were disappearing, replaced by another civilization.

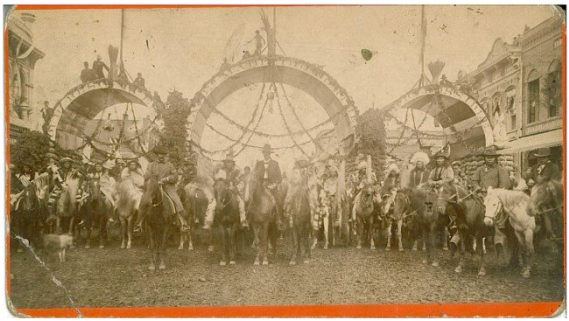
Anxious to inspire virtue, Jean-Marie Abadie had only succeeded in revealing the diabolical vice lurking within the most virtuous souls. In the eternal struggle between Vice and Virtue, never

had Virtue done so much damage as on this occasion. As La Rochefoucauld so aptly wrote :

"***Vices enter into the composition of virtues, as poisons enter into remedies.***"



Fort Nez-Percé aka **Fort Walla Walla.**



Inauguration de l'arrivée du chemin de fer à Walla Walla 1883.

The Tragic Valentine's Day

(The Ocean Ranger joins the Titanic)
15 February 1982

—I'll tell you one thing: if anything ever happens out there, they won't save a single man… Because in case of an emergency, no one knows what to do. You'll never get a man out alive. No one knew where to go when they called the muster stations.

These were the words of an Ocean Ranger crew member who rotated shifts with his brother on the platform, each working alternate weeks. (One day, due to a technical delay, the two brothers found themselves at the family table at the same time, exchanging these grim predictions.)

—The next day, he added, *my brother left—and he never came back.*

The Ocean Ranger oil rig had much in common with the TITANIC. First, gigantism. Like that legendary liner, the Ocean Ranger was the largest of its kind in the world. Like the TITANIC, it was described as unsinkable. Like the TITANIC, it operated in the North Atlantic. Like the TITANIC, it incorporated the pinnacle of modern technological achievements. And, like the TITANIC, it inspired absolute confidence. But in the end, as with the Titanic, its fate was tragic, except that here, giant waves replaced icebergs.

These giant waves have an English name that reflects their terrifying reality : "killer waves" or "rogue waves," because of their devastating power. They inspire the same primal fear as Jules

Verne's giant octopuses or the colossal men of *Gulliver's Travels*. Although rare in any specific location, every sailor sees at least one in his life. They can rise up to 30 metres. While ordinary waves may hit a vessel with 15 tonnes of force per square metre, killer waves can strike with blows of up to 100 tonnes per square metre. According to oceanographers, such waves occur when large swells encounter a strong opposing current, creating massive instability.

Canadian professor Osborne, who studied ocean dynamics, discovered that killer waves "steal" the kinetic energy of their neighbouring waves, just as the tallest trees in a forest capture sunlight at the expense of the withering shrubs below – or, as in human society, the powerful enrich themselves disproportionately by draining the resources of others. The neighbouring waves, the preceding and the following, are dwarfed to allow the killer wave to grow gigantic.

This upward projection of energy simultaneously creates two deep liquid troughs on either side. Papillon, the famous prison escapee, began learning the rudiments of this oceanographic reality by observing wave patterns before his escape from the penal colony of Cayenne.

Another Canadian oceanographer, Henri Neu, who worked with *the National Oceanographic Institute in Dartmouth*, explained: "*Nowhere else in North America are waves as large as those on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. In the Hibernia area specifically, waves are higher than anywhere else because of shoals and refraction on the Grand Bank*." He likened this phenomenon to light bending through a prism: "*The convergence of energy produces giant waves*." In the shallow waters of the Grand Banks – less than 75 metres in places – waves slow down and are forced upwards by the shoals.

Today, satellites monitor these rogue waves globally, and it is estimated that two or three killer waves are constantly criss-crossing the oceans of our planet.

The vast Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Grand Banks of Newfoundland have always been dangerous for navigation, even without killer waves. In 1914, the *Empress of Ireland* sank off Rimouski after a collision. In November 1981, the Liberian cargo ship *Euro Princess* ran aground on *Sable Island*, Nova Scotia, after drifting perilously close to the Rowan-Juneau oil platform. The *Canadian Coast Guard* helicopter braved the storm to rescue the twenty-six platform survivors and the freighter's crew.

On December 16, 1981, the LNG carrier *Paso Colombia* broke its anchor line and was thrown ashore near *Cape Sable*. Its five crew members were rescued by the tug *Joshua The*. Days later, the same tug diverted to save four fishermen who had abandoned their burning 30-metre vessel before returning to assist *Paso Colombia*.

On Christmas Day that year [1981], a fire broke out aboard the tanker *Hudson Transport* off Matane, Quebec, resulting in several deaths. Three days later, the *Ravenscraig*, a 65,000-ton British container ship, suffered rudder failure in the Cabot Strait and drifted for two days in heavy seas before finally being towed to Halifax.

Of course, the tragic record for accidental loss of life in these waters remains with the Titanic, which struck an iceberg on April 15, 1912, killing 1,503 passengers.

The *Second World War* also brought maritime disasters. In 1942, off Newfoundland, the American destroyer *Truxtun* and the

supply ship *Pollux* sank with 204 men lost. In October of the same year, the ferry *Caribou* was torpedoed by a U-boat in the Cabot Strait, killing 135.

Spring —seal hunting season off Newfoundland— has always been perilous. The spring of 1914 was the deadliest. The *Newfoundland* lost seventy-nine sailors trapped in ice during a blizzard near the Funks, while the *Southern Cross* vanished off Cape Race with all 173 aboard.

By winter 1982, *Mobil Oil of Canada* operated three major oil platforms in *the Jeanne d'Arc Basin* north of the *Grand Banks* : the Ocean Ranger, Sedco 706, and Zapata Ugland. The Ocean Ranger, built by Mitsubishi in Hiroshima in 1976, was owned by *Odeco Drilling of Canada,* a subsidiary of *Ocean Drilling and Exploration Company of New Orleans* – a typical multinational structure designed to maximise tax advantages[2].

Semi-submersible platforms like the Ocean Ranger are created for extreme conditions and deep waters. They float half-submerged, anchored firmly to the seabed, with thrusters to maintain position. The Ocean Ranger had worked in Alaska and the North Sea. It was known as "*the Cadillac of oil rigs*," designed to operate in waters over 450 metres deep and drill down to 7,500 metres.

The colossal platform, 120 metres long and 70 metres wide, stood topped by a 48-metre drilling tower. Its twelve 25-ton anchors were connected by chains and cables extending over two kilometres. It carried four 10-metre lifeboats and twelve inflatable

[2] Use of subsidiaries in low-tax jurisdictions ("tax havens") is typical in multinational structure to shift profits to these subsidiaries through various means in order to reduce overall tax liabilities.

rafts – theoretically enough for 376 people, although it housed only a hundred. But even that was insufficient.

With a height equal to nine buses stacked end to end, it was the world's largest self-propelled semi-submersible rig. Its complex structure included two massive pontoons containing ballast and fuel tanks, propulsion rooms with electric and hydraulic motors, eight vertical waterproof columns, storage rooms, control centres, crew quarters, a radio room, infirmary, offices, and a helicopter pad.

Like the Titanic, its upper deck was *considered watertight* in case of accident. Support included three Sikorsky helicopters, a boat, and a weather station. However, while it carried life jackets and rafts, it had no survival suits for the entire crew – only thirty were available for helicopter crew changes. Moreover, no one had been trained in sea survival or lifeboat operations.

On that stormy Valentine's night, women in St. John's watched with dread as snow squalls battered their windows. Out in the North Atlantic, the Ocean Ranger was tossed like a walnut shell by giant waves. Some men prayed; others cursed. The floating island heeled sharply as two technicians failed to stabilise it. Captain Clarence Haus, in his final shift before relief, ordered the foreman ashore to be informed. For an hour, ballast engineers had tried to solve the problem to no avail. At 1:00 a.m., Haus ordered abandonment and alerted the Canadian Coast Guard. The Ocean Ranger's final message, at 1:30 a.m., confirmed abandonment.

Loudspeakers blared: "*This alert is not a drill! Please dress warmly and proceed to your assigned muster stations!*" But men reacted in all ways. Some panicked, dressing quickly despite the lack of survival suits – an absence the American company

dismissed since the platform was outside Canadian jurisdiction. Others, exhausted, slept through the alarms. Many cabins had disabled intercoms to avoid constant disturbance. As a result, people acted individually. Some cursed the incessant warnings ; others ignored them as false alarms, a routine occurrence. One worker recalled : "*There were so many alarms. After the first, guys just stayed in their cabins. They waited for it to be over. No one came for them. That's why so many died*."

A former cook recounted being exempt from drills because Sunday was his busiest day : "*If I burned the food, I'd be in big trouble. So I skipped the drills. Anyway, someone came to check attendance and ticked my name off even if I stayed in bed*."

My father always said, recalled one woman, "*These Yankees have no respect for human life. They didn't provide any safe environment. The only reason men stayed was the good salary*."

The wife of the platform nurse added : "*My husband once sent a man ashore for X-rays for a swollen arm. The foreman was furious. He told my husband he'd decide in future. My husband replied: 'Fine, but if something goes wrong, it's your responsibility.' Another time, my husband complained to the company doctor ashore that he had no painkillers or bandages. Only after confronting him did he finally receive some basic supplies*."

In addition to the false alarms, there were the real ones, which gave rise to scenes of indescribable confusion and disorder. As recently as the week before, the Ocean Ranger had almost been evacuated. The crew was carrying out a water-loading operation from a logistics vessel. The engineer wanted to transfer this fluid from a port-side tank to another on the starboard side. However, to rebalance the platform's trim, too much ballast was ejected from

one of its legs, causing a severe list – even though the sea was calm and the sun was shining.

"*We heard the alarm instructing us to dress warmly, put on our life jackets, and proceed to the evacuation stations. Then, after three or four seconds, a second announcement cancelled the first. But we went anyway, only to meet people coming back to their rooms… the confusion got everyone on their feet*."

It was beyond comprehension.

On that occasion, spokesmen for the American company declared, of course, that the accident was not serious despite appearances. As for the platform's superintendent, speaking from shore, he sought to reassure everyone at a safety meeting, affirming with conviction that the platform was unsinkable – "*unsinkable ! Someone might have retorted, Yes, just like the Titanic*." The Titanic, above which we were!! But in this environment of hardened, macho men, such a remark would have been immediately condemned as cowardice.

However, the final accident –the one that killed the entire crew– at least loosened tongues, overcoming the fear many had of being seen as cowards. Those who were on leave that week confessed that there was a constant fear among workers of the J.24 shaft.

A month earlier, the same farce had occurred. An evacuation was ordered and then cancelled, and those who were supposed to be sleeping spent hours climbing steep stairs –or rather, decks– waiting for nothing at evacuation posts in the icy Greenland wind. The men were certain that an accident would happen one day. In

fact, they had nicknamed the platform "*the Ocean Danger*," as a way to exorcise their fear with a pun.

You can't imagine what it's like "*to watch a 20-metre wall of water rushing straight at you when there's nothing you can do. You really expect to be knocked on your ass!*"

Of course, you grit your teeth and hunch your shoulders, just like during the Second World War, when people sheltered in cellars, waiting for the whistling bombs to explode, hoping it wouldn't be overhead.

On the Ocean Ranger, there had never been a proper, well-organized evacuation drill to teach the crew how to evacuate calmly and efficiently. These drills were supposed to be performed every Sunday, but to avoid disrupting drilling operations, only empty lifeboats were lowered. No one was ever put through a real exercise. During these pseudo-drills, Malcolm Watkins, the safety chief, bustled about like a demon on the upper deck. Dave Russell was responsible for waking the stragglers, sending stewards to wake those who hadn't left their cabins. But with only eight stewards to rouse ninety-two men spread over three decks, it was materially impossible – even in calm weather when the platform was stable.

—*What do you want us to do ?* complained one steward bitterly after a previous alert. *Drag each guy out by the ear ? We knocked on doors, turned on the lights, called them. What else could we do ? They're not children ! We're not going to put their socks on them !*

After that, things got worse. Only three men were left on night duty. If there was a problem, they were called first. They would prepare themselves and then wake the others. They would

adjust their life jackets, dress warmly, while the security manager on duty woke a few nearby rooms. Then Dave Russell took one side and the stewards the rest. When it was over, they compared notes – yet some still claimed they had never been woken.

During the final disaster on February 15, 1982, few workers were likely woken by stewards, as traffic in the corridors was almost impossible due to tremors and darkness. In reality, it was probably the violent shocks of the raging sea that threw sleepers from their bunks. Those awake had their own ordeal: they had to find their warmest clothes and put them on before donning life jackets – if they had one – all in total darkness.

Even during the accident the previous week, in calm seas and daylight, the electricity had been cut off and panic had spread through the corridors. At least then, workers could find their lifeboats thanks to the sun. But on that fatal winter night, each man had to grope for his belongings, then literally haul himself along corridors that had become vertical chimneys, clinging to handrails. Due to the platform's violent movements, they often lost their grip, fell on top of each other, or slammed against steel walls. In the absolute darkness, merciless fights broke out – panicked men battling for the handrail, for the door, for the chance to pass those weaker who blocked the way. *A fight to the death for survival*. It is known that in moments of panic, many men succumb to *paranoid madness*, attacking anyone who comes too close.

Those who reached the upper deck – only a handful – entered a Kafkaesque universe, an even more terrifying hell. There, the real struggle against the furious elements began.

Each lifeboat, designed for fifty-eight people, was quickly overwhelmed. During the evacuation the previous week in broad

daylight, none of the men had been able to find their assigned boats, and it didn't matter : no one volunteered to operate the cranes. Some boats remained empty. Workers were more concerned with jumping into the nearest boat to save themselves than operating the cranes to lower them into the water. They relied on others to do it. Most cranes were unusable anyway due to the platform's extreme tilt.

Among the black silhouettes moving across the two icy decks on that night of disaster, some wore no life jackets or warm clothing. Terrified, they had rushed out in pyjamas or t-shirts, immediately soaked by rain and frozen by polar winds. They collapsed from hypothermia, slipped on decks covered in twenty centimeters of ice, and sank into the black ocean. Their screams were brief in the darkness, as the merciful cold and heavy waves quickly ended their suffering.

Major Colin Gillis, officer in charge of *the Halifax Rescue Coordination Centre*, said his services learned of the disaster via a message relayed by the New York Rescue Centre. At 12:50 a.m. Halifax time, they received a telex from the platform stating it was listing at 10 to 15 degrees in the storm. Three logistics vessels, 8-10 km away, were diverted to the site but found nothing.

—*I really couldn't believe it had capsized*, Major Gillis said. *I thought the boats had just missed it in the storm. There were 15-metre waves and a huge swell. It was a night of horror. The sea was so high that the logistics ships were afraid to approach for fear of hitting lifeboats.*

In the face of such a disaster, the *Canadian Coast Guard* launched a frantic search in the icy winds and raging seas of the North Atlantic. Rescue planes arrived at dawn but saw only sinister

buoys. The only signs of life were seagulls circling in search of scraps. A spokesman announced that planes spotted two lifeboats, one capsized, the other upright but empty. Later, helicopters spotted three more lifeboats: two empty, one containing two corpses. They attempted to retrieve the bodies, but the furious sea forced them to abandon the effort. Of the eighty-four crew members, only one body was recovered on Monday and another on Tuesday. Hopes were briefly raised when radio signals were detected from a lifeboat's beacon, but these were automatic and did not necessarily indicate survivors.

The large yellow *Sea King rescue helicopters* from St. John's returned to base at nightfall after futile efforts to save lives. The weather forecast called for worsening conditions – snow, low visibility, increasing winds – but the search continued with Hercules aircraft. Despite this, *Newfoundland's Petroleum Branch* declared all eighty-four men –sixty-eight Canadians (including fifty-three Newfoundlanders), fifteen Americans, and one English immigrant– lost to the sea.

How could such a sophisticated platform, designed to withstand the roughest seas, capsize?

The Ocean Ranger had the most advanced safety systems, capable of facing waves of the century. It was erected on special pontoons that supposedly made sinking impossible.

When the scale of the disaster became clear, the House of Commons and Transport Minister Jean-Luc Pépin sent condolences to the victims' families.

Steven Neary revealed that two days earlier, he had received a report that the Ocean Ranger had almost capsized, but the

Americans said nothing to Canadian authorities. This proved that no one was truly in control offshore. *Mobil Oil Canada* announced it was sending specialized equipment to locate the wreckage.

At the Bowring restaurant overlooking the port of St. John's, reporters exchanged notes. A cold anger electrified the atmosphere at a special Mobil Oil Canada meeting at the Holiday Inn. Many young men in parkas came to hear what executives –if any dared show themselves– would say about their missing friends. Waiting at the bar, they spoke bitterly, convinced Mobil would blame it on an "*Act of God*" to avoid responsibility, as insurance companies often do.

There was talk of inadequate safety drills, the lack of survival suits, inexperienced ballast "*engineers*," and unsatisfactory inspections. Complaints rained down on anyone who might bear responsibility.

To everyone's surprise, Premier Brian Peckford was there, trying to gain political favour by claiming that offshore resources should belong to the provincial government rather than the federal – though the Ocean Ranger was not even in Canadian territorial waters.

Company executives could not explain why the Ocean Ranger – built for the harshest conditions – had capsized while two other Mobil platforms nearby had weathered the storm. They could not answer questions on safety, as *Odeco Drilling of Canada*, the owner, was not represented. The platform was registered in the US, so permits and inspections fell under American jurisdiction. A Canadian transport spokesman said, "*We have no responsibility for safety standards or certification, as it was not in Canadian territorial waters*."

The Canadian inquiry revealed utter disorder in this domain. Maritime Affairs depended on several ministries with ill-defined jurisdictions, made worse by *multinationals playing on multiple nationalities to avoid accountability*. "However, it is clear the federal authorities are responsible for oil platforms once they are anchored. When they move, the Canadian Coast Guard is responsible," said an official.

American financiers insisted the platform was American, since *US laws were vague, less restrictive, and rarely enforced due to political lobbying*. Platforms were supposed to be inspected annually, but the US Coast Guard had not inspected the Ocean Ranger in over two years, a direct violation of regulations. Ironically, they were scheduled to inspect it the day it sank… probably a businessman's lie.

Odeco Drilling of Canada, the only drilling company on the east coast, had not provided the crew with special training in lifeboat use. Other companies mandated three-week Canadian Coast Guard courses in first aid, firefighting, and sea survival, paying employee salaries during training. Mr. Crouns, Odeco's general foreman, declared days before the disaster that such courses were *unnecessary* – a comment he did not repeat afterwards.

Insurance companies, which deducted large sums from workers' pay, then found every possible reason not to pay compensation to widows and orphans.

The thieves became very active. A fundraiser by the *Evening Telegraph of St. John's* raised nearly $100,000, but as often happens, only about $24,000 was distributed. "*They collected a lot of money but almost no one got any*," said one observer. Lawyers

also profited by pressuring victims' families for legal representation fees.

The Canadians on the Ocean Ranger had companions in misfortune. During the same storm, a Soviet cargo ship, the Mekhanik Tarasov, sank east of the Ocean Ranger, taking thirty-three men into the icy North Atlantic. Seven survivors were rescued by the Coast Guard ship Sir Humphrey Gilbert and brought to St. John's.

According to the *Royal Commission on the Marine Disaster of the Ocean Ranger*, the causes were as follows. On February 14, 1982, a very low-pressure system settled over the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, with winds up to 90 knots and waves reaching 11 meters. At around 8 p.m., a large wave shattered a porthole in the ballast control room. Seawater short-circuited the electromagnetic ballast control panel, rendering the system unusable.

At around 3 a.m. on the 15th, power was restored, but some ballast valves accidentally opened, flooding the forward tanks on the port side. This caused a rapid list to port. According to the commission, the crew's attempts to regain control of the ballast system were unsuccessful.

It is questionable whether the men on board knew how to operate the manual ballasting systems, as they were not fully aware of the system's limitations in removing ballast from the forward tanks in the event of a severe list. As a result, they could no longer control the platform's horizontality and stability.

On February 15, at 1:09 a.m., the Ocean Ranger issued a distress call. Around 1:30 a.m., the crew began boarding the lifeboats to abandon the platform, which capsized and sank at

approximately 3:15 a.m. Efforts to rescue those who had managed to evacuate were *in vain*. All *eighty-four crew members* were lost, and only twenty-two bodies were later recovered.

All those who lost their loved ones on that tragic Valentine's Day in 1982 will remember it forever. Yet as long as they are remembered, those who disappeared will somehow continue to live on. This story may help younger generations understand and sympathize with those who suffered so deeply.

The Ocean Ranger and The Last Goodbye

On the fifteenth day of February in nineteen eighty-two,
The oil rig Ocean Ranger floated on the stormy blue,
Just off the coast of Newfoundland, with a very happy crew.
All at once she vanished into the briny blue.
Ships and planes searched for days, But couldn't find a clue
To the Ocean Ranger. Oh God, what will we do?
The families of those men on board
Were praying every night
That their loved ones would be found
And that things would turn out right.
But for days they searched the seas,
And hope was running low.
No one was found; they all went down,
Down, down below.

Chorus:
Ocean Ranger, Ocean Ranger, wherever can you be?
Ocean Ranger, Ocean Ranger, at the bottom of the sea.
God bless those eighty-four brave men,
Courageous, strong, and true.

I'm sure God will be happy
To have them in his mighty crew.
I'm told she was a sturdy rig
And could stand a heavy blow.
So why did the Ocean Ranger sink?
Maybe we'll never know.
And hope was running low,
No one was found; they were all at the bottom,
Down, down below.

Chorus:
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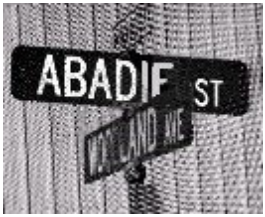

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